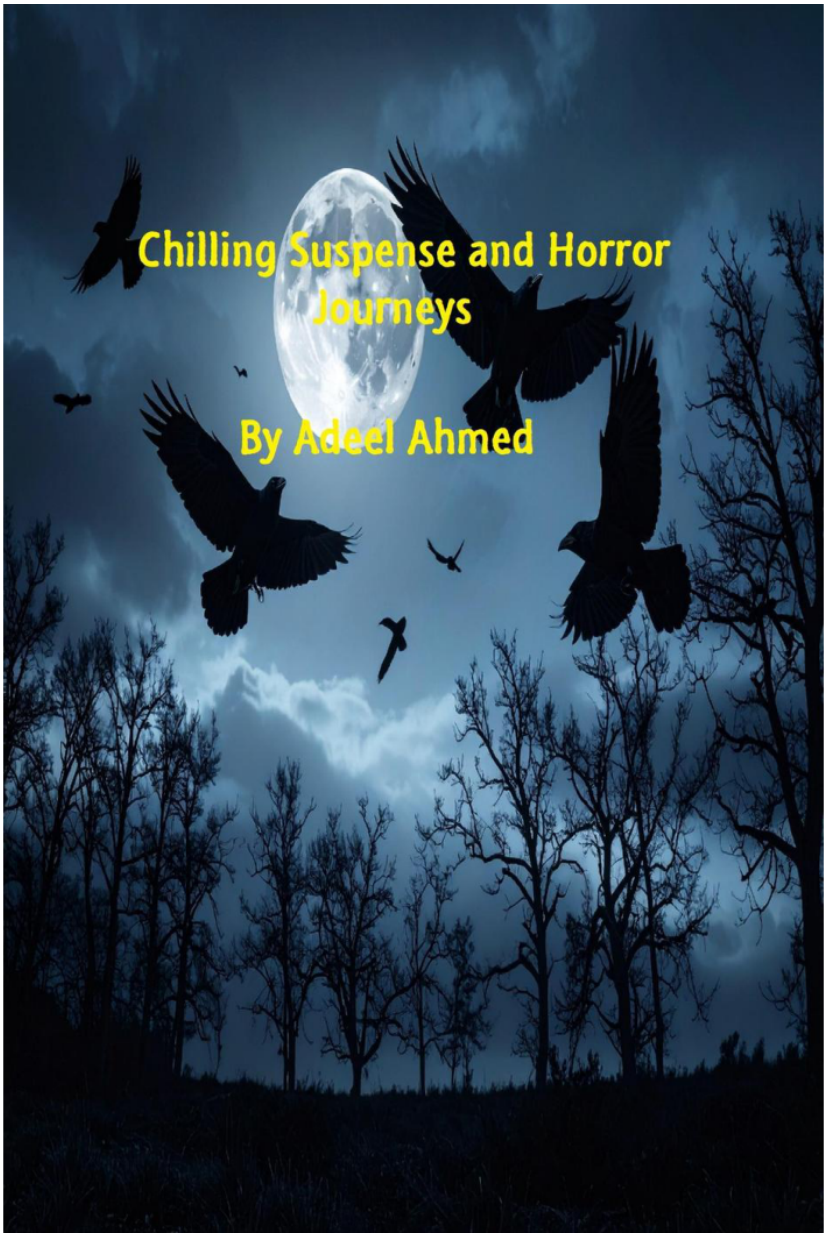
Chilling Suspense and Horror Journeys
By Adeel Ahmed

Chilling Suspense and Horrifying Journeys

Adeel

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CHILLING SUSPENSE AND HORRIFYING JOURNEYS

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Table of Contents

Title Page

Copyright Page

Dedication

Epigraph

Part 1

Shards of Sweet Memories

Secrets Beneath Sindh’s Sands

Our Journey Toward Our Destination

The Spirit that Scream in Shadows

The Grave Beyond the Wall

Dark Roads, Silent Screams from Nawabshah to Lahore

The Chasing Shadow

From City Streets to Mountain Dreams

The Night We Spoke to the Dead

Part 2

The Hunters Rise with December’s Return

Whispers of Skeletons in Kailash Valley

The Decision that Could Cause Disaster

The Journey towards Darkness

Voices at the Last Station

Journey Beyond the Mountain Road

Whispers in Chitral

The Road That Climbs to Silence

The Village at the Edge of Memory

The Boy Who Ran from the Bones

The Hill of the Restless Dead

Lost in the Blood-Black Depths

The Fall Into Darkness

The Whispering Walls

The Djinn Slayers' Victory

Part 3

Winter's Breath and an Unfinished Promise

The Shadows That Walk Without Heads

The Road Over the River of Ghosts

Rosy's Journey Through the Heart of Hyderabad

The Dilemma of the Restless Souls

The Village of Shadows

Whispers from the Unseen

The Final Chapter

Part 4

December's Reunion: After a Year Apart

The Awakening of the Hellhound

Gharo the Gateway to the Delta

Whispers of the Hound Through Time

A Night of Resolution

Flight into the City of Lights

In Pursuit of Shadows

The Howl That Summoned the Light

The Feast Before the Hunt

The Guardian of the Hellhound

The Pharaoh’s Shadow: Secret of the Silence

The Battle with Pharaoh’s Army

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Further Reading: Chilling Suspense and Horrifying Journeys

About the Author

About the Publisher

To my beloved sister — your love, patience, and faith have been my constant light through every dark and uncertain path. You believed in my dreams even when they seemed impossible, and your quiet strength gave me courage to keep writing. This book is as much yours as it is mine — a reflection of your unwavering support, laughter, and care. Thank you for being my greatest inspiration and my forever source of strength.

"Five men set forth where shadows breathe and silence speaks.In every haunted place they wandered, unseen eyes watched,restless spirits whispered, and the veil between worlds grew thin.Yet through terror and darkness, they did not flee—for their courage became light for the lost,and their purpose, a shield for the living."

Part 1

The Reaper of Midnight

Shards of Sweet Memories

Greetings, I'm Ahmed—and today, I'm going to share a tale woven with horror, suspense, and unforgettable twists that unfolded at the final stop of our holiday adventure.

The spotlight of this story shines on me and my three dearest companions: Peter, Amit, and Diljeet. Though we hail from different religious and cultural backgrounds, our bond has always transcended faith and tradition. What unites us is far deeper than what sets us apart.

We are all sons of Pakistan, a land of colors, contrasts, and legends. I live in the bustling city of Karachi. Peter calls Sialkot his home. Amit resides in Hyderabad, while Diljeet comes from Nankana Sahib near Lahore. Our friendship began in the innocence of childhood—and it only grew stronger with time.

Each of us has walked a different path in life: I serve as a private detective, Peter is a savvy businessman, Amit manages his family's agricultural estates, and Diljeet walks the line of law as a police officer. Every December, no matter how hectic the year, we set aside time to reunite. These holiday getaways are sacred to us—a tradition carved in stone.

Together, we've roamed sunlit islands, ventured into forgotten villages, and wandered through ruins that whispered secrets of the past. Christmas always brings something special—Peter, ever the mystery man, surprises us every year with an enchanting gift or a plan that adds a touch of magic to our journey.

On the much-awaited first day of our December escape, I invited my friends over for tea and dinner to finalize this year's destination. The clock ticked slowly as I eagerly waited for it to strike 5:00 PM. My friends had taken their flights earlier that day, and when the moment finally arrived—they stood at my doorstep.

The door creaked open to reveal three familiar silhouettes—shadows of my past and anchors in my present. Their faces lit up, and so did mine. We embraced like brothers reuniting after years apart. There was a comfort in their presence that no words could ever fully capture.

Before they could even settle in, I had already laid out warm, creamy tea and savory snacks—samosas, pakoras, and fried lentil cakes glistening in the light of the setting sun. The aroma of

cardamom and cloves drifted lazily through the house. Laughter erupted as we huddled around the tea table, steam curling from our cups like whispers from old ghosts. We spoke of childhood mischief—of days when scraped knees and cracked cricket bats were our only worries.

Time, as it always does in good company, slipped away unnoticed. Soon we moved to the dining room where our trusted cook, Mohsin, had outdone himself. The table groaned under the weight of a magnificent feast—biryani bursting with flavor, kebabs grilled to perfection, naan still warm from the tandoor, and creamy raita cooling the spice-laden curries.

We ate like kings, but more than the food, it was the company that fed our spirits.

After the meal, we stepped outside beneath a starlit sky. The world was hushed, the air crisp, the trees lining the quiet neighborhood casting long shadows across the road. We walked slowly, shoulders occasionally bumping as we spoke about past adventures—camping near Hingol, the ancient ruins of Mohenjo-Daro, and the time Amit nearly fell off a cliff in Balochistan chasing an eagle with his drone.

But this year, something felt different. A strange energy hovered around us—subtle, but undeniable. We all sensed it.

And then, like lightning splitting the sky, an idea struck me.

"What if we go hitchhiking through the Himalayan range—deep into the Pakistani side of Jammu and Kashmir?" I said, my voice steady but laced with thrill.

There was a pause.

Peter leaned back, arms crossed, his eyes lighting up. "Now that... that sounds like an adventure."

Amit nodded slowly, visibly intrigued. "Remote. Untouched. Dangerous. I like it."

But Diljeet remained quiet.

He looked away for a moment, as if trying to listen to something only he could hear. The silence stretched. His brows furrowed in thought. Finally, he looked at each of us in turn—his expression unreadable.

Then, a smile tugged at the corner of his lips. It was faint, hesitant. "Alright," he said, "let's do it."

We cheered in unison, our voices echoing into the chilly night. But amidst the celebration, my eyes caught something peculiar.

Diljeet carried a strange bag on his back. It wasn't bulky—rather, it was compact, sleek, and tightly packed. It looked almost like a parachute bag, but smaller. More refined. The surface was matte black and had no logos or tags. Not civilian. Not military. Just... something else.

"What's in the bag?" Peter asked, finally voicing what we were all thinking.

Diljeet raised a hand before any of us could press further, his expression playful but guarded. "Don't ask," he said with a half-grin, "You'll know when the time comes."

There was a flicker in his eye—part jest, part warning. And that single sentence stirred a thousand questions. Was it a gift? A gadget? A prank?

Or was it something else entirely?

The bag became a presence of its own, quietly commanding attention. We tried to move past it, but the question lingered in the air like an unfinished sentence.

That night, long after the others had gone to sleep, I stood alone by the window in my room. The night was still. The moon hung low and heavy, casting silver light across the floor. In the distance, a stray dog barked once, then fell silent.

I thought about Diljeet.

We shared more than friendship—we shared an obsession. The unknown, the unexplainable, the eerie. Paranormal tales weren't just fireside stories for us. They were puzzles to be solved. Codes to crack. From the jinn stories of Thar to the haunted forts of interior Sindh—we chased legends.

But it was Karsaz Road that haunted us the most.

For years, we hunted the phantom bride said to appear on moonless nights. We set up surveillance. We mapped appearances. We slept in cars. We even faked a ghost sighting once to see how quickly rumors spread.

But we never found her.

Eventually, we declared it a myth—nothing more than urban fiction. We exposed the tale. We printed pamphlets, handed them out to shopkeepers, pedestrians, rickshaw drivers. Our message was clear: don't fear shadows. Ghosts don't haunt roads—people do.

We were proud of it.

But as I stood by the window that night, watching the shadows shift across the garden, I felt something I hadn't in years.

A chill.

A whisper at the edge of thought.

What if we were wrong?

What if our disbelief had blinded us?

And what if this trip into the mountains—this final stop—was where the truth waited?

The next morning, the plan was simple. We'd leave in two days. No luxury vehicles. No guides. Just backpacks, minimal supplies, and a map. Peter would arrange basic rations. Amit handled local contacts for clearance. I took care of route and communication. And Diljeet? He just tightened the straps on that mysterious bag and smiled.

None of us pressed him again.

There are things better left unasked—until the time comes.

And though we didn't know it yet, the time was coming fast.

What we believed. What we didn't. What we mocked. What we feared.

All of it was about to be tested—by snow, by silence, and by something far older than legends.

This would be no ordinary journey.

And it all began with a strange suggestion, a chilling grin, and a bag whose silence spoke louder than words.

Secrets Beneath Sindh's Sands

After a hearty breakfast of steaming parathas, spicy omelets, and strong karak chai, the four of us gathered our belongings, hearts light and spirits soaring. The day had finally arrived—the beginning of a journey we had dreamed about, speculated over, and now, finally, stood on the edge of.

The road ahead was long, winding, and soaked in curiosity. Our destination? A stretch of land nestled within legend and silence. But for now, all that mattered was that we were finally moving.

Our trusted companion on this trip was Rosy—our rose-red, 2015-model jeep, lovingly named for the hue of her exterior. Compact but fierce, she had seen more of Pakistan than most people ever would. Her full-metal shell had weathered brutal monsoon storms, blistering desert heat, and one particularly unforgettable encounter with a stubborn goat in Balochistan.

Rosy was ready. She always was.

Our first milestone: the historic **Mehran Highway**, which would lead us straight toward **Nawabshah**—the gateway to this year's adventure.

Before departure, we ran through our final checks with military precision. The fuel tank? Full to the brim. Rosy had just been tuned the week before—her engine now purred like a satisfied lion. Her tires looked sturdy, her brakes sharp. Every bolt and belt checked and double-checked.

Preparedness wasn't just a habit—it was our way of showing respect to the road.

I had made sure we were packed with essentials: **four spare tires**, **a full wrench kit**, **a jack and lifting rod**, **canned food**, and enough **bottled water** to last us three days, in case fate decided to play a cruel joke.

The journey to Nawabshah was expected to take approximately **seven hours**. To keep our senses sharp and our bodies rested, we agreed on a **rotation system**: each of us would drive for **one hour and forty-five minutes**, handing the wheel off as we went.

I locked the doors at home, handing the main gate keys to our guards with a firm nod. With the final **click of the gate latch**, something shifted inside me—a thrill, a spark, a quiet understanding that once again, we were setting out into the

unknown.

And so, it began.

I took the first shift behind the wheel. The seat welcomed me like an old friend, and as I gripped the steering wheel, a wave of anticipation surged through my veins. Peter sat beside me, map in hand, his eyes scanning the route with practiced ease. He had volunteered to be our navigator—of course he had. That was Peter: reliable, calculated, ever in control of the path forward.

Our plan was to stay in **Nawabshah** for at least **two days**—to rest, to explore, and perhaps, to see if the town held any hidden legends of its own.

From **Superhighway Road**, we cruised comfortably toward **Hyderabad**. The ride was smooth, the road glimmering beneath Rosy's wheels. Our spirits, like the morning sun, were rising.

At the **Hyderabad Highway check post**, uniformed guards eyed us with suspicion, but a polite smile and the flash of our identity cards melted the tension. After a brief exchange and a nod of approval, we were waved through. The gates to another city—and another chapter—swung open before us.

The landscape shifted.

The road stretched far and wide, flanked by slow-moving canals and deep green fields swaying in rhythm with the wind. **Hyderabad** passed us in a blur of color and scent, the city buzzing faintly in the background as we drifted through its edge. The scent of diesel mixed with fried street food. Narrow alleys flickered to our sides, echoing distant childhood memories.

Amit, seated in the back, leaned forward, his voice rising above the hum of the engine.

"You know," he said, "I've been to Nawabshah a few times. It's a strange place. Quiet. But old... old in a way that makes the air feel thick."

He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes.

Then he added, almost as an afterthought, "If we don't make it before sunset, we might cross paths with dacoits."

Peter raised an eyebrow. "Dacoits? Really?"

"They're not the myth," Amit said with a smirk. "They're real around these parts. Especially in the late hours."

We chuckled. Nervous laughter, the kind that hides beneath it the realization that some jokes are laced with truth. Amit's warning was wrapped in humor, but we got the message: **daylight is your**

ally; don't let it go to waste.

Still, our mood didn't falter. The wind was in our favor, Rosy sang beneath us, and our voices rose in laughter and song. The playlist bounced from classic ghazals to rock anthems. Peter cracked his usual array of corny jokes. Amit teased him mercilessly. Diljeet, ever the composed one, just shook his head with an amused smile.

Each of us had a **licensed firearm**, tucked away, just in case. We never traveled unprepared—except Diljeet, of course. His **service weapon** was with him, always within reach. His hand had grown familiar with it, like an extension of his body. He was the kind of man who made you feel safe, even in the middle of nowhere.

After my shift, Diljeet slid into the driver's seat.

A **Punjabi Jat** through and through, he had a reputation for speed—both behind the wheel and on foot. But today, we asked him to take it easy. To our surprise, he nodded and obeyed without a word, his eyes focused, his hands calm on the wheel.

As the road curved deeper into the rural expanse, the light began to change—softer, warmer, laced with gold.

Amit's voice took on a different tone—**lower, more deliberate**.

"You know," he began, "there are stories around here. Old ones."

"What kind of stories?" Peter asked, leaning forward in curiosity.

Amit paused, as though choosing his words carefully.

"Shape shifters," he said. "**Ichchha Dhari Naags.**"

The words felt alien. Mythical.

He went on, his voice barely above a whisper, as if the wind itself might overhear.

He told us of a local legend—of **serpents** capable of transforming into humans at will. According to the tale, a **snake couple** once found shelter in a noble family's home. Grateful, they offered the family a priceless gift: a **mani**, a jewel glowing with unearthly light and power. When the gem was eventually sold, the family's fortunes changed overnight. From poverty to prosperity, just like that.

"But," Amit added, "some say the family vanished years later. No explanation."

The story hung in the air like mist, and for a moment, none of us

spoke.

Outside, the wind slowed. The sun dipped slightly lower. The land seemed to lean in, listening.

Rosy continued her steady march toward the horizon.

When Diljeet's stretch ended, Amit took over. The grip on the wheel came naturally to him—like a farmer tending to his land. His eyes stayed alert, darting occasionally to the rearview mirror, as if expecting something.

We were getting close now.

Closer not only to **Nawabshah**, but to whatever mysteries or truths the road had in store. Each mile added weight to the air, like walking deeper into a cave where sunlight begins to forget your name.

The terrain shifted once again—flatter, drier. Trees became sparse. Shadows stretched longer. The jokes slowed. Conversation thinned.

The sun had begun its descent, golden rays piercing the dusty sky, casting long silhouettes of Rosy and her passengers across the road. It was Diljeet who insisted on taking the final stretch. None of us objected.

With his usual confidence, he drove with the ease and strength of a man raised on earth and discipline. His jaw was set. His eyes forward. His hands firm.

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Our Journey Toward Our Destination

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The landscape turned surreal in the dying light—**ethereal**, almost dreamlike. The horizon bled orange and indigo. The road curled like a serpent through the silence.

And then—there it was.

Just as dusk began to crawl over the edges of the sky, **we saw it**—our **first milestone**.

A simple stone sign. Weather-beaten. Cracked with age. But it told us what we needed to know:

We had arrived… or so we thought.

The Spirit that Scream in Shadows

As we sat around the dinner table, sharing ideas about adding more adventure to our trip, something felt... off. The laughter that usually filled our evenings was replaced by uneasy glances and a silence that lingered longer than it should. Peter and Diljeet exchanged anxious looks, the kind that say more than words ever could. It was as if both of them were keeping a secret—something they were burning to tell but were afraid to speak aloud.

We were used to Peter pulling surprises every Christmas—unexpected road trips, spontaneous hikes, or mysterious challenges—but this time, even Diljeet seemed unusually restless. He kept fidgeting with the hem of his shirt, his eyes darting from one corner of the room to another, as if something unseen lurked in the shadows.

Breaking the silence, Amit and I decided to lighten the mood.

"What about ghost hunting in Nawabshah?" I said, half-joking. "That place is surrounded by old crematoriums and forgotten cemeteries. Especially near that derelict hotel—the one locals say no one dares to stay in for more than a night."

Everyone froze. The words hung in the air like a whisper carried by a cold wind.

For a moment, no one said a thing. Then Peter leaned forward, his eyes glinting with something between excitement and fear. "Ghost hunting?" he said slowly. "Now that's something I've been waiting to hear."

Diljeet's lips curled into a grin. "The Reaper of Midnight," he said softly. "You've all heard of her, right?"

We hadn't—at least, not the full story. But we'd read enough online, stumbled upon enough strange folklore, to know the name wasn't just another local myth. According to the tales whispered in Nawabshah's darker corners, The Reaper was a ghostly woman who appeared near an old crematorium at the stroke of midnight. Dressed in white, face veiled, she carried a rusted reaping tool—part sickle, part scythe—and stalked the living with unrelenting rage. They said her eyes, when seen through the mist, glowed faintly red, like dying embers.

That cursed weapon earned her the grim title: **The Reaper.**

I could feel a chill creep up my spine even as we discussed it.

Yet, beneath the fear, there was a strange pull—an unspoken curiosity that none of us could resist.

"But where would we even get ghost-hunting gear?" Amit asked, trying to sound casual but failing miserably.

Peter and Diljeet exchanged another glance—this one filled with anticipation. Without a word, Peter reached for his backpack and placed it on the table. Slowly, almost ceremoniously, he unzipped it. Out came an **EMF detector**, blinking faintly in the dim light, and an **EVP voice recorder**, sleek and compact. Then, as if rehearsed, Diljeet pulled out the final piece—a **thermal vision camera**, the kind you only see in professional investigations.

The room fell silent again. Even the ceiling fan seemed to hush its steady hum.

"Where did you get all this?" Amit whispered.

"Don't ask," Diljeet said with a sly grin. "I brought it thinking we might do something like this someday. And today, my wish came true."

The excitement around the table became palpable. Even those who had been skeptical seconds ago were now leaning forward, eyes wide with anticipation. It was as if the promise of confronting the supernatural had awakened something deep inside all of us—a hunger for the unknown.

Still, I tried to warn them. "This isn't a game," I said. "If the stories are even half true, we might not like what we find out there."

"Relax," Peter said, flashing his usual confident grin. "We've got you and Diljeet. You two have done this before. We'll be fine."

He couldn't have been more wrong.

The only obstacle between us and our midnight investigation was the hotel manager—and Abdul, the night watchman. Somehow, with a few convincing lies and the flash of our police and detective IDs, we got the manager to agree. We told him we were investigating reports of a possible robbery by a dangerous gang operating in the area. Suspicious, but unwilling to argue, he nodded reluctantly.

That left Abdul.

We found him near the back entrance, sitting under a flickering bulb that cast long, trembling shadows across his weathered face. When we told him what we wanted, he looked up at us as though he'd seen a ghost himself.

“The Reaper?” he repeated, his voice breaking. “Please... don’t go there. I have a wife... three small children. Don’t ask me to take you.”

His eyes glistened in the weak light, and for a moment, I felt guilty. But curiosity had already gripped us too tightly. We assured him we were armed and trained. After some hesitation—and after seeing our guns—he nodded, defeated, but not convinced.

“Only after two,” he said finally. “That’s when she comes.”

The way he said it—“she”—made my skin crawl. It wasn’t superstition in his voice; it was memory.

He told us that around 2:00 a.m., when the power often flickered out and the world seemed to stop breathing, faint cries could be heard from the direction of the crematorium. Soft, sorrowful wails, like a woman pleading for something she’d lost long ago. But the cries never faded—they grew, turned sharp, angry, as if someone—or something—was being torn apart between two worlds.

“She doesn’t just appear,” Abdul said, his voice trembling. “She hunts. If she sees you... she chases you with that thing. A long, curved blade. No one who saw her up close ever came back.”

We fell silent. Even Peter, who had been fearless until that moment, seemed to lose a shade of color.

Still, we waited.

The clock struck **2:00 a.m.**

The hotel was eerily quiet. Even the crickets had stopped singing. The air was thick, as though heavy with secrets. We stepped outside, our breaths visible in the cold air, and began our walk toward the crematorium.

The moon hung low, pale and sickly behind drifting clouds. Each step we took echoed faintly on the cracked pathway. The trees on either side seemed to bend inward, their skeletal branches reaching out as if to warn us back.

Then, faintly, we heard it.

Whispers.

They came from nowhere and everywhere all at once—a low, collective murmur, like the dead whispering in their sleep. Then, the sound of wailing drifted through the wind—faint, distant, unmistakable.

We stopped.

“Did you hear that?” Peter whispered.

No one answered. The sound grew louder. It was the sound of grief twisted into rage, a cry that clawed at the soul.

Diljeet switched on the thermal camera. The screen flickered, showing only patches of blue and green. Nothing unusual. Peter raised the EMF detector—it beeped erratically, lights flashing red, then green, then red again.

"Something's here," he said under his breath.

Abdul clutched his torch tightly, his hands trembling. "We should go back," he murmured. "This is the hour she wakes."

But before we could answer, the air turned ice-cold.

A faint silhouette appeared at the edge of the light—a tall, thin figure draped in white, her shawl fluttering as though stirred by an invisible breeze. She moved strangely, almost gliding. Her head tilted at an unnatural angle.

And in her hands—gleaming faintly under the moonlight—was the **reaping tool**.

The Reaper.

Her presence was suffocating. The temperature dropped even further, our breaths coming out in sharp bursts of mist. The EMF detector went wild, beeping uncontrollably.

Then came the sound—the scream.

It wasn't human. It wasn't animal. It was something in between—a shriek that tore through the night like broken glass scraping against metal. The very air vibrated with it.

Abdul screamed and dropped the torch. The light flickered, spinning across the ground, and for a moment, the beam caught her face.

We shouldn't have looked.

What we saw wasn't a face—it was a blur of decay and distortion, as if time itself had been cruel to her. Hollow eyes, skin stretched too thin, lips twisted into an eternal, agonized smile.

The Reaper raised her weapon.

We ran.

I don't remember who screamed first. All I recall is the deafening sound of our footsteps, the pounding of our hearts, and the sense that the darkness itself was chasing us. Behind us, that terrible wail rose again—closer, sharper, angry.

Branches tore at our clothes. The wind howled like a thousand unseen voices. I dared not look back. Every instinct screamed to keep running.

When we finally reached the hotel, we slammed the doors shut, bolted them, and switched off every light. The room was drenched in silence, save for the sound of our heavy breathing.

No one spoke. No one dared to.

Outside, the wind raged for a while, then died suddenly. The night returned to its deathly stillness.

I sat by the window, trembling, staring into the darkness where we had come from. My mind replayed every second—the cry, the face, the weapon.

Sleep was impossible.

We knew that tomorrow, we would have to go back and uncover the truth. But deep inside, we all felt it—what we saw wasn't an illusion.

The Reaper of Midnight was real.

And she knew we had seen her.

The Grave Beyond the Wall

We woke early that morning, a quiet unease hanging in the air as we prepared for the next phase of our investigation. The sky outside was still gray, wrapped in a mist that seemed reluctant to lift. The events of the previous night haunted every glance, every breath. Nobody spoke much—our words seemed too fragile for the heaviness in the room.

Peter was silent, lost in thought. Amit sat by the window, staring out into the thick morning fog, his cup of tea long gone cold. Even Diljeet, who usually tried to lighten the tension with his humor, appeared distant, methodically checking the equipment—his movements mechanical, deliberate, as if keeping busy could keep fear at bay.

Abdul arrived shortly after sunrise, dressed neatly, almost too neatly, as though trying to disguise the unease that lingered in his expression. He smiled—a little too wide, a little too forced—and greeted us with a nervous laugh. But there was something about his demeanor that felt... wrong. His eyes darted around, refusing to meet mine, flickering like a candle fighting against the wind.

I watched him carefully.

"Abdul," I said, pulling him aside. "Is everything alright? You seem disturbed. What's bothering you?"

He hesitated, glancing around as if making sure no one else was listening. Then his voice dropped to a whisper. "I'm not happy with my job," he confessed. "My manager keeps sending me out late at night—to fetch food, supplies, anything he needs. The market's far, and the quickest route..." He swallowed hard. "...it cuts through the cemetery and the crematorium."

The words sent a slow, crawling chill down my spine.

He went on, his voice trembling, "I've had some close calls. I've seen things—shadows that follow when there shouldn't be anyone there... voices that whisper when I walk past the graves. Once, I heard footsteps behind me, but when I turned—nothing. Just the wind and the smell of burning."

He paused, looking down at his trembling hands. "I've tried to quit, sir. But I have three children. I can't afford to lose this job."

His fear was real—thick in the air, almost tangible. I could feel it clinging to him like the scent of smoke. For a moment, my instinct

as an investigator was replaced by something else—compassion.

"Would you consider moving to Karachi?" I asked softly. "Work for me as a housekeeper. I'll double your salary."

His eyes widened, hope flickering where fear once was. "Truly?"

"Truly," I nodded. "But keep this between us. Not a word to anyone."

He smiled faintly, a genuine smile this time, and nodded. "I promise."

By noon, we regrouped with the rest of the team. The air was hot and heavy, but beneath the blazing sun, I still felt the cold touch of the unseen. I informed the manager we'd need Abdul's assistance for our "operation"—a fabricated story about catching robbers, just as before. He seemed skeptical, but we were already past explanations.

Our destination was roughly a kilometer away. The walk felt endless. Dust clung to our boots, and the occasional rustle from the nearby trees made us tighten our grips on our gear. When the path finally split, we found ourselves standing before two places of eternal rest—a Hindu crematorium on one side, and a Muslim graveyard on the other. Only a six-foot wall divided them, but the atmosphere felt worlds apart.

The crematorium looked abandoned, consumed by age and neglect. Its structure leaned under the weight of decades, maybe centuries. The blackened stones and broken pillars bore the stains of countless fires. On the other side of the wall, the graveyard stretched far into the distance, rows of weathered tombs half-swallowed by wild grass and creeping vines.

As we began setting up, the curious eyes of a few local children appeared from behind the trees. They whispered among themselves, too fascinated—or perhaps too afraid—to come closer. Eventually, one brave boy stepped forward.

"Did you see anything strange here?" I asked gently.

He hesitated, then pointed toward a lone grave pressed against the crematorium wall. "That one," he said. "That's where it comes from."

We followed his finger. The grave was old—its stones cracked, its inscriptions erased by time. Dry weeds grew thick around it. Even from a distance, something about it felt... wrong, as if the ground itself was breathing.

The children, encouraged by each other's presence, spoke

quickly now. They told us that smoke rose from that grave after sunset, thin and blue, like a ghost's sigh. Sometimes, a woman appeared—draped in a white shawl, holding a rusted reaping tool. She wandered among the graves, her voice echoing through the fog, crying and laughing at once. Those who ran survived. Those who didn't—well, no one knew for sure.

Amit shifted uncomfortably. "Sounds like the same woman Abdul mentioned," he muttered.

We instructed the children to return home. They didn't argue; they scattered like leaves in the wind.

The area grew quiet again, save for the faint rustling of dry grass and the cawing of distant crows.

We placed an **EVP recorder** directly on the grave. The moment it touched the stone, the air around us seemed to thicken. Then we brought the **EMF detector** closer. The device shrieked—loud, frantic, flashing red.

Something was there.

I exchanged a look with Diljeet. Neither of us spoke, but we both knew the pattern. The same energy signature we'd picked up the night before—only stronger.

We took our positions. Diljeet and I checked our weapons, the metallic click echoing faintly in the heavy air. We crouched behind a small boundary wall, setting up our surveillance camera to face the grave. Another camera tracked our own movement from a distance, its blinking red light barely visible in the fading daylight.

The sun began to dip. The horizon bled shades of crimson and gold before surrendering to deep purple.

"Get the thermal camera ready," I told Diljeet.

He nodded, adjusting the lens, his hands steady but his eyes alert. Amit and Peter monitored the EMF readings while Abdul stayed behind, clutching his torch, whispering silent prayers under his breath.

Minutes passed. Then, as the last sliver of sunlight disappeared, it began.

At first, just a shimmer—like heat waves rising from the grave. Then, slowly, a faint plume of **smoke** began to rise. The EVP recorder hissed softly, picking up static.

Out of the smoke, a shape began to take form.

A woman's silhouette. Slow. Unearthly.

The air turned icy. The smell of burnt wood and decay filled our

nostrils.

"Zoom in," I whispered.

Through the thermal lens, her outline came into focus—a woman cloaked in white, clutching a heavy, curved reaping tool. Her head tilted unnaturally, her movements jerky, as if she were struggling against invisible strings.

"It's her," Amit whispered, voice trembling. "The woman in white."

The words barely left his mouth before she vanished. One second she was there; the next, gone—like smoke swallowed by the wind.

We scanned the area. Nothing. The EMF lights faded back to green. The static stopped. The night grew silent again, unnaturally silent.

Abdul's hands shook violently. "I told you," he whispered. "We should not be here."

But before I could respond, a scream shattered the silence.

"Fellows! Look behind you!" Abdul shouted.

We spun around.

She was standing there.

Not near the grave. Not at the edge of the crematorium.

But **just a few meters away**.

Every muscle in my body froze. Her shawl billowed in a wind that didn't exist. Her eyes—hollow and burning faintly red—locked onto us. Her voice, when it came, was guttural, furious, and impossibly human.

"I heard everything you said!"

The sound tore through us like a blade.

Diljeet and I reacted instinctively, raising our weapons. The thunder of gunfire split the air—but the bullets passed through her like mist. No resistance. No effect.

She took a step forward. The ground beneath her blackened. The EMF detector screeched wildly.

"Now!" I shouted.

As planned, Amit, Peter, and Abdul flicked on their high-beam torches. Blinding white light flooded the darkness.

She let out a shriek that rattled the bones—a sound that seemed to pierce through the world itself. The air rippled. The smoke twisted violently.

And then—she was gone.

Evaporated into the night.

Silence.

For a moment, none of us moved. The torches flickered, and the sound of our own breathing filled the emptiness. The smell of burned earth and ozone lingered where she had stood.

Peter lowered his light slowly. “Was that real?” he whispered.

No one answered. We didn’t need to. The terror in our eyes said enough.

The Reaper of Midnight was no longer a myth, no longer a rumor whispered in fear. She was real—alive in ways the living could never understand.

And somehow, we knew... she wasn’t done with us yet.

Dark Roads, Silent Screams from Nawabshah to Lahore

After returning from that haunted place, our hearts were still pounding like drums of war. The eerie silence seemed to follow us, clinging to our skin, filling the spaces between every breath. Even as the headlights of our jeep illuminated the winding road back to the hotel, none of us spoke. It felt as though an invisible fog had wrapped itself around us—cold, suffocating, and alive.

When we finally reached the hotel gates, the place looked different. The same building that had felt so ordinary the day before now seemed foreign, as though it too had witnessed what we had seen and was now keeping its distance.

We went straight to the manager's office. He looked up, startled, as we entered—his eyes questioning our pale faces and trembling hands.

"The area's unsafe," I told him firmly. "It's crawling with robbers. Nobody should go out after sunset—not even for the smallest errand."

The color drained from his face. He nodded quickly but said nothing, his silence almost a confession of something he already suspected.

That night, dinner was a ritual of discomfort. We sat around the dining table, the same one that had once echoed with laughter and plans, but now it was surrounded by shadows. The lights flickered faintly, casting long, shifting shapes across the walls. Even the clinking of cutlery seemed too loud, as if the sound itself disturbed the air.

No one could eat much. Our minds replayed the night's horror again and again—the smoke, the grave, the woman's voice echoing from beyond the veil. It felt as if she were still watching us, lurking just beyond the reach of the dim hotel lights.

Without a word of protest, we all agreed to check out—long before our scheduled departure.

As we packed our belongings in the silence of our rooms, I noticed Abdul standing near the reception desk, holding a paper in his hand. His face was pale, yet his expression was firm. He approached the manager with a trembling voice, his eyes glistening

under the weak light.

"I have to leave," he said quietly, handing over the letter.

The manager blinked in confusion. "Leave? At this hour?"

"My mother's condition has worsened," Abdul replied. "I must return to my village in Lahore immediately to be with her."

His words were steady, but his tone betrayed him. It was the tone of a man desperate to flee, not just from duty, but from something that had followed him out of the dark.

The manager stared at him for a long moment, his lips pressed tight, then finally nodded. "Go. I won't stop you."

By 9:30 p.m., our bags were loaded, the bills settled, and our nerves frayed beyond repair. The manager didn't try to delay us. If anything, he seemed relieved—almost grateful—to see us leave. Without saying much, he refunded the remaining amount and offered a short, nervous farewell.

Outside, the night was dense and still. The air felt heavier than usual, the kind that makes you look over your shoulder every few steps.

We inspected every inch of the jeep under the harsh glare of the headlights. No detail escaped us this time. The memory of that spectral figure was still fresh, and we couldn't risk a single mistake.

Abdul, now free from his duties, volunteered to take the first driving shift. It was part of the pact we had made—to divide the ten-hour journey equally, two hours each, driving without rest until dawn.

Our destination: **Lahore.**

Estimated arrival: **8:00 a.m.**

As we drove through the sleeping city and onto the Indus Highway, the air around us grew colder, heavier, almost charged. The road stretched endlessly into darkness, its surface glowing faintly under the headlights like a pale scar across the land.

The rhythmic hum of the tires should have been comforting, but instead, it sounded hollow—like a warning drum echoing through the night.

After about an hour, as we approached a security checkpoint, a uniformed guard stepped forward. His flashlight cut through the darkness, and he raised a hand for us to stop.

It was a routine inspection. But what happened next was anything but routine.

The guard's name tag read **Bashir.** He recognized us almost

immediately, saluting sharply as his face lit up with familiarity.

"How are you, sir?" he asked, addressing Diljeet.

"I'm fine," Diljeet replied, forcing a polite smile.

Bashir nodded. "And how's everything at home? Your family doing well?"

"They're all fine, thank you," Diljeet said. His tone was calm, measured.

Bashir smiled warmly. "Good, good. By the way..." he paused, tilting his head slightly, "...your cat is really very cute."

Silence.

The words hung in the air like a slow, creeping poison.

I felt my pulse spike. For a moment, I thought I'd misheard him. But Bashir's face was calm, sincere, his flashlight beam steady as he waited for a response.

Diljeet didn't flinch. His expression didn't change. He just smiled faintly and said, "Oh yes... she is indeed."

The guard grinned, stepped aside, and waved us through. "Safe travels," he said.

We rolled past the checkpoint in utter silence.

No one spoke for a full minute. The sound of the engine filled the emptiness inside the jeep, but it wasn't enough to drown out the pounding of our hearts.

Finally, I turned toward the others, my voice low, barely a whisper. "Which cat was he talking about?"

No answer.

We all turned slowly toward the back seat, expecting—dreading—to see something there. Maybe a pair of glowing eyes staring back at us from the shadows. Maybe the faint movement of something small and alive.

But there was nothing.

No cat.

No movement.

Only the empty space where our luggage sat neatly stacked.

Amit swallowed hard. "Maybe... maybe he was mistaken?"

But even he didn't sound convinced.

The thought crept into my mind like a whisper from the dark: *Had something followed us?*

I had checked the jeep thoroughly before leaving the hotel—under the seats, inside the trunk, even the glove compartment. There was no cat. There was nothing. And yet, that guard had

spoken with such certainty, such unsettling calm.

A cold wave of realization washed over me.

"Don't panic," I said finally, forcing steadiness into my voice. "Let's just focus on driving. Stick to your turns, stay alert."

But inside, I wasn't calm. My thoughts were racing. Bashir's words echoed in my head, replaying over and over: *Your cat is really very cute.*

We drove on through the long, endless night. The highway stretched into blackness, the lights from passing trucks flashing like ghostly eyes. The air inside the jeep felt thick, heavy, as though something unseen was riding along with us.

Every few minutes, I caught myself glancing at the rearview mirror—expecting to see a white shape crouched behind us, silent and smiling.

By the time we crossed the Lahore check post, dawn had begun to bloom on the horizon. The clock read **5:00 a.m.**

And just like that—the suffocating heaviness that had followed us for hours... was gone.

The change was instant, almost shocking.

The morning light bathed everything in gold. The fields stretched out endlessly on both sides, lush and alive. Rivers shimmered under the rising sun, and mist rolled gently over the green earth like a sigh of relief.

The road, which had felt cursed just an hour before, now looked peaceful—almost divine.

As we entered the outskirts of the city, we saw newly built houses, restaurants, and streetlights lining the road. The hum of civilization returned—a sound we hadn't realized we'd missed.

For the first time in hours, we breathed easily.

By exactly **8:00 a.m.**, we arrived at our hotel in Lahore, a place we'd booked weeks ago. The air was crisp, and the city was slowly waking up to life.

Abdul began unloading the luggage while we stretched our weary limbs, our minds still fogged from the long drive. The faint smell of wet earth and breakfast from nearby stalls mingled in the air—a comforting scent after a night that felt endless.

Then, from across the street, a frail but noble-looking old man approached us. His clothes were simple, his beard silver, and his eyes—though calm—carried a strange intensity, as if they could see far beyond the surface of things.

“Excuse me,” he said softly, “do you have any food?”

Assuming he was a beggar, I reached for my wallet. But before I could offer him anything, he raised his hand and shook his head.

“I am not here to beg,” he said in a low, steady voice. “I only seek a little food.”

Slightly taken aback, I handed him a small pack of our remaining supplies—bread, fruit, and two bottles of water. He accepted them with quiet dignity.

But then... he froze. His expression changed.

He sniffed the air once, twice, and his face darkened.

“I smell something here,” he whispered. “Something... not of this world.”

The words sliced through us like a blade.

Before we could react, he reached into his cloth bag and pulled out five small, handwoven amulets—each wrapped in black thread, with a metallic charm glinting faintly at its center.

“Take these,” he said firmly, pressing one into each of our hands.

“Keep them with you at all times. Evil doesn’t always leave quietly. Sometimes... it hides.”

And with that, he turned and walked away—his figure fading into the morning light, disappearing down a narrow alley until there was nothing left but silence.

We stood there, holding the amulets tightly, the chill of his words lingering in the air.

None of us spoke. We didn’t need to.

Because deep down, we all knew the truth.

The nightmare wasn’t over.

The Reaper of Midnight might have vanished from sight—

but she was still with us.

Somewhere.

Watching.

Waiting.

The Chasing Shadow

The new hotel we had booked stood quietly at the corner of a peaceful Lahore street. It wasn't as grand as the one we had left behind, but it had a strange, comforting charm—warm yellow lights glowing behind tall glass windows, a neat entrance framed with potted plants, and a faint scent of sandalwood in the air.

The manager greeted us with an easy smile and polite words, his calm manner a welcome contrast to the tension that had clung to us for days. Within minutes, we were shown to our room—a single, spacious hall-style suite reserved exclusively for us. It was large enough to hold five separate beds, three televisions mounted on the walls, and four private bathrooms.

An unusual setup, yes, but ideal for us. After everything we had been through, being together under one roof felt like a blessing.

The moment we stepped inside, a soft hush fell over us. The air conditioner hummed gently, the curtains swayed with the faint breeze from the balcony, and the light filtering through the sheer drapes painted everything in muted gold. For the first time in what felt like forever, there was comfort. Safety.

Breakfast was served shortly after we settled in. On our request, it was brought directly to the room—steaming parathas, omelets, fresh fruit, and a kettle of hot tea. The manager, true to his word, was exceptionally cooperative. He'd assured us that anything we needed could be brought up with the simple ring of a bell.

During our booking, we had also requested a small dining setup, and sure enough, a polished wooden table with five chairs had been arranged neatly in one corner of the room. As we gathered around it, the aroma of the meal filled the space, warm and home-like.

For a while, the silence between us was peaceful—different from the uneasy quiet of the nights before. We ate slowly, each of us trying to ease into the calmness we so desperately needed. But peace is a fragile thing, and soon, our minds drifted back to the only topic that seemed to shadow us everywhere: the old baba, and the dark omen he had sensed around us.

His voice still echoed in my memory: *"Evil doesn't always leave quietly. Sometimes... it hides."*

Those words had unsettled us far more than we cared to admit.

After breakfast, we lingered at the table, sipping tea and talking

softly. Abdul leaned back in his chair, eyes clouded with thought. “Do you really think he knew what he was talking about?” he asked. “That something is still around us?”

Peter looked up from his cup. “He seemed to know things no stranger should know. The way he appeared and disappeared...” He paused, frowning. “It didn’t feel ordinary.”

I nodded silently. “Maybe he wasn’t ordinary.”

Though we were far from home, the shared space gave us a strange sense of unity. There was comfort in knowing that no matter what happened, we would face it together.

By mid-morning, the heaviness in the room began to fade. Conversation lightened, and laughter—soft, hesitant at first—broke through the tension like sunlight filtering through storm clouds. We began reminiscing about our past travels—times when the world was simpler and the nights didn’t whisper our names.

Amit recalled a funny incident from a road trip years ago, his impression of an angry shopkeeper so perfect that it made us all laugh until our sides hurt. For the first time in days, our laughter sounded genuine.

Abdul stood by the window, the morning light outlining his silhouette. “It’s strange,” he said, gazing down at the quiet street below. “We started this journey looking for adventure... and now all we want is peace.”

His words hung in the air for a moment before we nodded in silent agreement.

Peter, ever the observer, pulled out his worn leather notebook and began scribbling down notes—his attempt to make sense of everything that had happened. He believed that by writing it down, we might find clarity. But I suspected that some things defy explanation, no matter how carefully they’re documented.

Meanwhile, Diljeet spoke to the hotel staff about laundry and cleaning. The manager responded promptly, sending two attendants who worked efficiently and wordlessly. Everything about this hotel felt calm, orderly, and reassuringly mundane—exactly what we needed after the chaos of our last few days.

By the afternoon, the sun had softened into a mellow gold, casting long shadows through the curtains. We decided to step out and explore the area. The neighborhood was unhurried—a small market nearby sold local crafts, a tea stall stood at the corner with its sweet, spiced aroma wafting into the street, and a few locals sat

chatting lazily on wooden benches.

Life here moved slowly. Time seemed to stretch and breathe.

For the first time in what felt like forever, we felt normal again.

After running a few errands—buying toiletries, snacks, and a newspaper—we wandered into a nearby park. It was quiet, with rows of old trees and the soft chirping of birds returning to their nests. We sat together on a line of wooden benches, letting the calm air wash over us.

The late-afternoon sky was painted in shades of orange and violet. The world felt still, almost suspended between day and night.

And then, just when I thought peace had finally found us—something stirred.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a flicker of movement beyond the trimmed hedges. A shadow glided across the grass, too smooth, too deliberate. I turned my head slowly.

A cat.

The same one.

Its fur was as black as midnight, and under the fading light, it glistened unnaturally—as though its coat absorbed the dying rays of the sun. It moved with eerie grace, pacing back and forth near the edge of the park, never coming closer. Its eyes—twin orbs of pale green—seemed to watch us intently, almost intelligently.

A shiver ran down my spine.

"Is that...?" Peter began, but his voice faltered.

"Yes," I whispered. "It's her."

We all sat frozen, our eyes locked on the creature.

Perhaps it sensed the amulets hanging around our necks—those black-threaded charms given to us by the baba. None of us had dared remove them. Since that night, they had become our only shield against the unknown.

The cat didn't move closer. It merely watched. Waiting.

And then, without warning, another figure appeared—walking slowly from the far end of the park. The white of his robes caught the last gleam of sunlight, and the soft jingle of metallic beads marked his steps.

It was him.

The baba.

He moved with quiet authority, each step deliberate, measured. His eyes held the calm of someone who had seen far too much—and

understood it all.

We rose to greet him, our surprise quickly giving way to relief. There was something deeply reassuring about his presence, as though he carried light within him that darkness could not touch.

"Please," I said, gesturing to the bench. "Sit with us."

He nodded with a faint smile and lowered himself beside Abdul. We offered him a bottle of water and a few snacks we'd bought from the market. He accepted them graciously, his hands steady, his gaze thoughtful.

For a while, he said nothing. He simply looked toward the cat that lingered beyond the hedge. Then he spoke, his voice low but clear.

"I've been watching it too," he said softly. "It followed you here."

The words hit us like a cold gust of wind.

Abdul swallowed hard. "Why?" he asked. "What does it want from us?"

The baba turned his gaze toward him. "Tell me everything," he said. "From the beginning."

So we did.

Abdul began, recounting every detail—the graveyard, the haunting voice, the woman in white, the guard's chilling remark about the cat. As he spoke, the baba listened in silence, his eyes half-closed as though peering inward.

When Abdul finished, the baba remained still for several long moments. The rustling of the trees filled the quiet space between us. Finally, he opened his eyes and spoke in a tone that seemed to vibrate through the air.

"This spirit does not seek your harm," he said. "It calls out to you. It seeks release."

His words lingered in the air like incense smoke.

We exchanged uneasy glances. Could it be true? Could that same entity—the one that had terrified us—really be calling for help?

The baba continued, his gaze firm now. "There are those who die with something unfinished—an injustice, a secret, a curse unbroken. They wander, not out of malice, but because they are bound by what remains undone."

I felt a chill crawl up my neck. "So it's... trapped?"

"Yes," he said simply. "And it found you for a reason."

His eyes moved slowly from one face to another, his expression

grave but compassionate. “Do not remove your amulets,” he warned. “Not even for a moment—except when you bathe or change your clothes. And even then, keep them close. The protection they offer is not endless, but it is strong.”

We nodded in silence. None of us dared question him.

The wind stirred again, rustling the leaves above us. When we turned back toward the hedge, the cat was gone.

But the baba’s eyes stayed fixed on the spot where it had stood.

He seemed to see something we couldn’t—something moving beyond the reach of mortal sight.

When he finally looked at us again, there was both kindness and warning in his gaze.

“The journey is not over,” he said quietly. “It is only changing form.”

And then, before any of us could speak, he rose, gave a slow nod, and began walking away—his white robes fluttering gently as the sun slipped below the horizon.

We sat there in stunned silence, the evening air growing colder around us.

In the distance, the city lights flickered to life one by one, but none of them seemed bright enough to chase away the shadow that had once again found us.

From City Streets to Mountain Dreams

Our three-day stay at the hotel in Lahore had been captivating. The hospitality was warm, the city shimmered with brightness, and the streets hummed with life. Yet, beneath that brightness, a shadow lingered. From the very moment we stepped into the marble-floored lobby, we knew we weren't alone. A spirit had chosen us—a shape-shifting shadow bound in the form of a black cat. It prowled silently through corridors, its eyes gleaming unnaturally in the dim light. No matter where we went—in the dining area, the elevator, or even the courtyard—it was always there, watching.

We never heard its paws, never felt its steps, only its gaze. And that gaze clung to us like a curse.

The only comfort we found came from the baba's teachings. His words still echoed in our minds like a protective chant:

"Keep these talismans with you. Faith and fear ward off evil."

Each of us clutched our amulets as though they were lifelines. They were the only thing keeping dread from seeping into our souls.

By the morning of our departure, tension was palpable. As we loaded our luggage, no one joked or laughed the way we usually did before a road trip. The Rosy jeep stood at the gate, gleaming faintly under the morning haze. We fueled it, checked the tires and brakes twice, and stacked snacks and bottles of water neatly in the back. Amit took the driver's seat, his jaw tight, and without a word, we began our eastward journey toward Kashmir.

The first few hours passed quietly. Lahore's chaotic rhythm faded behind us, replaced by the rolling plains of Punjab. Wheat fields rippled in the wind like golden waves, and children waved at us from distant villages. Yet the silence inside the jeep was unnerving. Even the hum of the engine sounded heavy—as if it carried a weight none of us dared to name.

Midway, we reached the **Chakothi check post**—the official crossing point into Azad Kashmir. Armed officers examined our documents and combed through the jeep with practiced eyes. Their faces betrayed no emotion, but their presence added an unspoken tension. As soon as we crossed the checkpoint, the world seemed to transform. Lahore's dusty air was replaced by crisp mountain wind.

The Jhelum River twisted far below, catching fragments of sunlight in its restless current.

The road became narrow, hugging cliffs that seemed to rise endlessly toward the sky. Mist curled through the trees like a living thing, wrapping the world in pale silver. At first, it was beautiful—breathtaking, even. But then, that beauty began to feel deceptive. Every bend, every shadowed turn of the mountain road carried a sense of being watched.

Once or twice, I thought I saw movement in the rearview mirror—a blur of darkness flitting between the trees. I blinked, looked again. Nothing. Yet the feeling didn't fade.

Hours passed. The sun dipped behind the peaks, and the valleys turned to violet. The jeep's headlights cut through the gathering fog like knives. Inside, we said little. Each of us, in our own way, tried to convince ourselves that the unease was just fatigue. But deep down, we all felt it—the same unshakable dread we had brought from Lahore.

By twilight, we finally reached our **guesthouse in Kashmir**. The host greeted us warmly and guided us inside. It was a large, timber-built house resting at the edge of a pine forest. The rooms were simple but elegant—thick wooden furniture, woolen rugs, and windows that framed a breathtaking view of the valley below. The faint scent of burning walnut wood drifted through the corridors, mingling with the clean chill of mountain air.

It felt safe—or so we wanted to believe.

We unpacked quietly, each pretending to be tired, though what we really felt was cautious relief. The valley outside was beautiful, serene even, but that serenity carried a silence too deep to be natural.

That evening, steaming cups of **Kashmiri green tea** arrived with slices of walnut bread. We gathered in the common room around a flickering fire. The orange glow painted our faces, but the shadows that danced behind us seemed far too alive. For a long while, no one spoke.

It was Peter who finally broke the silence. "Why is that cat-spirit still chasing us?" he murmured, his eyes reflecting the flames.

Diljeet leaned back, his gaze fixed on the dark hills outside the window. "Maybe we disturbed something when we entered the crematory. Maybe it doesn't want to let go."

Abdul fiddled nervously with his talisman. "It hasn't hurt us...

not yet. But it's not leaving either. That's worse."

Amit exhaled slowly, staring at the fire. "Maybe it's not chasing us out of anger. Maybe it's trying to show us something."

No one responded. The only sound was the crackle of wood, the hiss of air escaping from a burning log.

We argued a little, reasoned more, trying to bury our fear under logic. But in the end, we circled back to the same thought: the baba's words—**deny its dread, do not give it power**.

After dinner, exhaustion began to weigh on us, and one by one, we drifted to our rooms. The fire in the common hall dimmed, leaving the guesthouse cloaked in soft shadows. Outside, the wind whispered through the trees, carrying with it the faint scent of pine and snow.

Just as I began to close my eyes, I heard it.

A sound—so faint it could have been my imagination.

A **meow**.

Not soft. Not natural. But drawn out—long, hollow, stretched like a voice echoing from the depths of a well.

Peter sat upright instantly. "Did you hear that?"

Before I could answer, the sound came again—closer this time. A dragging noise followed it, like claws against wood.

My heart thudded painfully against my ribs. The others stirred awake—Abdul clutching his talisman, Diljeet frozen mid-breath, Amit whispering, "It's here..."

The room felt colder. The light from the bedside lamp flickered once, twice, and then steadied—but weaker than before. Shadows in the corners seemed to ripple.

We listened in complete stillness. The sound of slow, deliberate footsteps moved through the corridor outside—soft, padded, but heavy enough to be heard through the wooden floorboards.

Then came the unmistakable scrape of something brushing against our door.

Peter moved closer to the door, pressing his ear against the wood. "It's right outside," he mouthed.

A faint growl vibrated from the other side—low, resonant, unnatural. The handle trembled, then stopped.

No one dared move.

Suddenly, the lamp flickered violently and went out, plunging us into darkness. Abdul gasped. Someone's hand—cold and trembling—gripped my arm. The room filled with the faint metallic jingle of

our amulets, as if even they were trembling in the unseen wind.

Amit reached for his phone and turned on the flashlight. The beam cut through the dark—and caught something.

For a split second, a **pair of eyes** glowed from the crack beneath the door. Yellow. Burning. Watching.

Peter stumbled backward. “Oh God—”

Before anyone could react, a heavy **thud** struck the door. Then another. The entire frame shook. We backed away instinctively, hearts racing. The pounding stopped as suddenly as it began. The silence that followed was suffocating.

A minute passed. Then two.

Finally, Diljeet whispered, “Is it gone?”

No one answered.

Cautiously, Amit reached for the handle. His fingers trembled as he turned it—slowly, silently. The door creaked open just a fraction.

The corridor outside was empty.

No footsteps. No shadow. Only the faint flicker of a wall lantern and the soft hiss of wind through a half-open window at the far end.

We stepped out together, scanning every corner. And then we saw it—just beyond the threshold, a faint mark on the floor.

A paw print.

Large. Blackened at the edges, as if burned into the wood.

Abdul bent down, whispering a prayer. Peter took a step back. The mark shimmered faintly under the lantern light—and then, before our eyes, it began to fade. Slowly, it vanished, leaving the wood untouched.

No one spoke for a long time. We simply stood there, the silence pressing in from all sides.

Finally, Amit said what all of us were thinking. “It followed us across cities. Across borders. This isn’t coincidence. It’s bound to us.”

The air grew heavier with each word.

Outside, the wind howled through the valley, carrying a strange sound that might have been a whisper—or a warning.

I closed the door, locked it twice, and lay awake long after the others had forced themselves to sleep.

Through the darkness, I could still feel it—the weight of unseen eyes. The amulet against my chest grew warm, pulsing faintly like a heartbeat.

And though I told myself it was only my imagination, I swear I

heard it again... faint, distant, drifting through the wind from somewhere beyond the forest:

A meow.

Long. Haunting.

Calling my name.

The Whispered Secrets of the Dead

The crisp mountain air drifted in through the open windows, filling our lungs with freshness and our hearts with peace. The morning sunlight spilled gently across the wooden floorboards, glimmering on the dew that still clung to the windowpanes. From the valley below, the sound of temple bells mingled with the distant rush of a river. For the first time in days, our souls felt lighter.

After a refreshing shower, we sat together to enjoy a traditional Kashmiri breakfast. We were served **Kashmiri nun chai**, the salty pink tea that tasted faintly of cardamom, along with **girda**—the soft, round bread baked fresh that morning—**harissa**, a warm meat paste cooked overnight in copper pots, and **sweet shirmal**, its saffron hue glowing in the morning light. Each bite carried the warmth and richness of the valley's culture. It was a breakfast to remember, comforting and soulful, the kind that fills not just the body but the heart.

Despite the lingering unease from the mysterious spirit we seemed to have picked up back in Nawabshah, we chose to set that aside—for now. None of us wanted to spoil the peace that morning offered. We silently agreed to revisit that chilling topic later, perhaps when the valley's serenity gave us courage.

The day unfolded with boundless joy and adventure. By midmorning, the mist had lifted, revealing endless carpets of green hills that shimmered under the soft sunlight. We decided to explore the nearby countryside, and it was there that we met **Adeel**, a local man who offered to guide us. He was cheerful, his laughter easy, his eyes bright with the simple wisdom of one who belonged to these mountains.

He led us through winding trails bordered by wildflowers and cedar trees, narrating stories of the land as though the valley itself spoke through him. He told us how every mountain had a name, every stream a legend, every stone a whisper from the past. We walked for hours, our hearts lightened by the air, the beauty, and his company.

But then... something changed.

Just as Adeel was about to tell us something—something important—he stopped. His voice faltered mid-sentence. His smile faded.

For a heartbeat, his entire expression seemed to freeze.

His eyes darted toward the forest behind us. His lips pressed together, and he shook his head slowly. The liveliness drained from his face, replaced by a look of pure fear.

"What happened?" Peter asked, frowning.

Adeel didn't answer immediately. He just looked around, as though searching for unseen watchers among the trees. When he finally spoke, his voice was low and trembling.

"Not here," he whispered. "Let's keep walking."

The air grew colder as we followed him along a narrow, stony path that led to a clearing overlooking the valley. There, with the forest spread behind us like a dark sea, he finally stopped. His gaze met ours, uncertain, hesitant.

"I'll tell you," he said at last, "but promise me—whatever you hear now, you will never repeat it to anyone."

We nodded. His fear was too real to question.

Adeel drew a deep breath and pointed to a cluster of trees half a kilometer away, where mist still clung like cobwebs. "That place," he said, narrowing his eyes, "is feared by the locals. It is believed to be haunted."

The wind shifted, carrying the faint scent of pine and damp soil. My spine tingled.

Adeel hesitated again before continuing. "The story goes back to the British colonial era," he said. "A time when enslaved laborers were forced to carve roads and tunnels into these mountains. Many were beaten, starved, and left to die. When a group of them finally rebelled and refused to work, they were captured and dragged deep into the wilderness."

He paused. The silence that followed was unnerving.

"No one ever saw them again," he said finally. "It's believed they were buried alive in those woods."

Peter and Diljeet exchanged uneasy glances. The cold breeze rustled the grass beneath our feet, as though the valley itself reacted to the tale.

"From that day onward," Adeel continued, his voice lowering to a whisper, "strange things began to happen. Villagers claimed to hear cries echoing from that direction—cries that sound human, yet not quite. Shadows are seen moving in daylight. And sometimes, people say they hear their own names being called from inside that forest."

As his words faded, the wind stilled. Even the birds seemed to

fall silent.

And then, as if summoned by his very story, **a black cat** emerged from the tree line.

It moved slowly, deliberately, its body sleek and gleaming under the afternoon light. Its eyes locked on us—sharp, unblinking, intelligent. Then, without warning, it bolted, running straight toward the direction Adeel had pointed to.

We froze.

The timing was too perfect. Too unnatural.

Adeel's face turned ashen. "It's a sign," he whispered. "The spirit watches anyone who speaks of that place."

I exchanged a glance with **Diljeet**. As a detective and a police officer, we didn't believe in coincidences. Whatever this was, it wasn't random. It was deliberate.

And it was connected—to us, to the entity we'd encountered in Nawabshah, to the black cat that seemed to appear wherever we went.

To break the growing unease, we decided to continue with our original plan—to visit the waterfall Adeel had mentioned earlier. The road twisted through meadows and across small wooden bridges. When we reached the waterfall, its roar filled the air with power and purity. The sunlight caught the falling water, scattering rainbows across the mist.

We dipped our feet in the icy stream, laughed, and took pictures. For a few fleeting moments, we allowed the sound of rushing water to drown our thoughts. But beneath that laughter, our minds circled the same haunting idea—was that cat leading us somewhere? Or warning us?

By noon, we returned to the hotel, our clothes damp and our hearts divided between awe and anxiety. The aroma of freshly prepared lunch greeted us as we stepped into the dining hall. The staff had laid out a feast—**Rogan Josh**, tender lamb in rich red gravy; **Yakhni**, a delicately spiced yogurt-based curry; **Gushtaba**, soft minced mutton balls floating in creamy sauce; and skewers of sizzling **seekh kebabs**.

The colors, the fragrance, the warmth—it was a meal fit for kings. We ate in silence, savoring the food but lost in thought. The beauty of Kashmir had captivated our senses, yet somewhere within that beauty, darkness lingered—watchful, waiting.

Later that evening, the golden light of sunset poured through the

windowpanes. We gathered again at the tea table, each lost in our own reflections. The servant brought **Kahwa**—sweet green tea flavored with saffron, almonds, and cinnamon. The delicate aroma wrapped the air like a calming spell.

Peter broke the silence first. “You all saw that cat, didn’t you? It followed the exact path Adeel pointed to.”

Abdul nodded, frowning. “It’s her. The same spirit. She’s not just wandering anymore. She’s guiding us.”

I leaned back, the weight of realization settling over me. “She’s brought us here for a reason. Something ties her to this land.”

Diljeet’s jaw tightened. “Then we’ll find out what that reason is.”

Our eyes met across the table—two minds bound by purpose. We made a pact that night. We promised each other—and our three friends—that we would uncover the truth. Whatever it took.

We would not run anymore.

We would bring justice to the one who could no longer speak for herself.

Because she hadn’t harmed us—not in Nawabshah, not in Lahore, not here. She had watched us, yes. She had made her presence known. But never once had she caused pain.

Even back at the abandoned crematorium, when she had whispered that chilling line—*“I know what you’ve been discussing”*—there had been no malice in her voice. Only sorrow.

That meant only one thing—

She had been with us all along.

Not as an enemy. Not as a curse.

But as a seeker.

A lost soul, bound by injustice, tethered to a truth long buried beneath the soil of this haunted land.

And perhaps, deep within the stillness of that night, as the valley darkened and the wind whispered through the pines, she was waiting—watching from the shadows—hoping we would listen.

Because now, it was no longer coincidence.

It was destiny.

And she had brought us here to finish what history had begun.

The Night We Spoke to the Dead

The clock struck 9:00 PM—it was time for dinner. We gathered silently in the dining room, each of us weighed down by the same lingering question: how could we help the spirit find peace—reach heaven?

The table was filled with mouthwatering dishes: grilled trout from the Neelum River, spicy masala crabs, warm saffron rice, and freshly baked Kashmiri naan. But none of us were truly focused on the food. The air was thick with tension—something was coming.

Suddenly, I broke the silence.

"I have an idea," I blurted out, my voice cutting through the heaviness like a blade.

All four of my friends turned to me, eyes wide, curiosity mingled with dread.

"How?" Diljeet asked, setting his spoon down.

"Tonight," I said, "we meet the spirit. We ask her what she wants. It might be risky, but we have the amulets given to us by Baba. With his blessings, we shall be protected."

We finished the delicious dinner quickly, our minds already racing toward what awaited us in the night. Then we approached the hotel manager, requesting permission to leave the premises. Since he already knew about me and Diljeet, he agreed without hesitation.

At midnight, the clock struck twelve. The moment we stepped outside, a cold wind howled through the trees, and there she was—the same cat, perched on the boundary wall, watching us with intelligent, glowing eyes.

"We're here to help you," I said softly. "We are your friends. We want to help you find peace... reach eternity."

Without hesitation, the cat responded—not with a meow, but in a woman's voice, chilling yet sorrowful. It no longer surprised us.

In a sudden, spectral shimmer, the cat transformed into a woman, draped in tattered white, her hair floating unnaturally as if caught in water. Her eyes were heavy with years of pain.

"Follow me," she said, her voice echoing with sorrow.

We gripped our torches tightly and followed her into the darkness. She led us to the same abandoned patch of land behind those hills—a place locals claimed was cursed, where cries were

heard at night and shadows whispered your name.

There, in the silence, she began to speak.

“When you were discussing your trip to the northern side of Kashmir,” she said, “I was listening. I knew my moment had come... to find what I’ve waited decades for.”

Her voice cracked with emotion as she continued.

“On a dark night in the 19’s, a letter arrived. It read, ‘I am your son, Suraj. I am fine here at the northern side of Kashmir with my friends, not far from the Kashmiri Hotel.’ But I knew...” She paused, trembling. “The handwriting wasn’t his. And the letter arrived two years too late.”

We stared at her in stunned silence.

“That day, I knew my son was no more,” she whispered. “And when Adeel spoke of the haunted place... I realized my son, along with his friends, must be buried there.”

We promised her solemnly: if she led us to their graves, and we ensured a proper burial, she would never disturb the living again. She agreed with a nod, her ghostly form flickering in the cold moonlight.

The next morning, at first light, we returned to that accursed place with a group of laborers. The woman—now back in her cat form—watched in silence, tears forming in her glowing eyes.

“Dig deeper,” Diljeet commanded, his voice firm.

The digging went on for hours until, finally, the shovel struck something.

Bones.

Five skeletons, tangled and buried together beneath the cursed soil. A wave of sorrow, like a gust of wind, swept through the air. The woman-cat stood at the edge, unmoving, silent.

The remains were buried respectfully, following all rituals—cleansed, prayed over, and laid to rest. As the final prayer ended, a soft glow surrounded the cat. She turned to us, her final words heavy with the weight of a mother’s eternal grief.

“I never used the reaping tool to harm anyone... I used it to dig —hoping that one day, I would find my son’s grave.”

And then—she vanished.

No trace remained. No sound, no wind, just peace.

Since that day, the haunted land near the Kashmir valleys has never seen another ghost. Even the Nawabshah Crematorium, once plagued with disturbances, became calm, quiet... peaceful.

We spent the rest of our holidays in serenity, our hearts light, our mission fulfilled.

And then, it was time to return home.

Part 2

The Walking Human Skeletons

The Hunters Rise with December's Return

Winter had settled gently over Lahore, draping its streets in a soft, golden haze. The air was crisp, carrying the mingled scents of roasting chestnuts, freshly baked naan, and the distant hum of life from the old city. At Diljeet's welcoming home, a reunion was taking place.

Amit, Peter, Abdul, and I—four men whose paths had once crossed on nothing more than friendship's whim—now stood together as something else entirely: professional ghost hunters. Our success in the previous December had bound us in a way few could understand. We had walked through the shadows of the Nawabshah haunting, freed an earthbound spirit from its grief, and brought peace to the forsaken valley near the Kashmir Hotel. That victory was more than a tale to tell; it had become our shared purpose, our strange calling that had turned skepticism into faith.

The day began with laughter and steaming mugs of chai at a corner dhaba just a short walk from Diljeet's home. The city was still waking, vendors sweeping their stalls and calling out to early customers. We huddled around a small wooden table, hands wrapped around the warm cups, our breath fogging in the chilly morning air. The metal benches were cold, and the air smelled faintly of coal smoke and cardamom.

The waiter arrived with plates piled high: halwa puri, golden and glistening, paired with spicy chickpea curry and a tangy potato sabzi. Abdul, ever the quickest eater, tore through his first puri in moments while Peter tried to pace himself, savoring each bite like a man tasting history. Amit teased him, saying he ate like someone documenting an archaeological find. The crisp crunch of the fried bread, the sweet melt of semolina halwa—it felt like Lahore itself was welcoming us back, wrapping us in warmth despite the chill that lingered on our skin.

Between mouthfuls, we swapped stories, laughing about the year gone by. Our conversation drifted easily from ghost hunts to gossip, from serious plans to the absurd possibility of opening a ghost-hunting café one day—"with haunted coffee mugs," as Peter joked. Abdul promised to handle the décor, claiming he knew a man who

could get us “authentic cursed mirrors” from Peshawar. Even Diljeet, usually the calmest among us, laughed so hard he nearly spilled his chai. By the time we finished, the plates were empty, the chai was gone, and the morning sun had climbed higher, painting the streets in gold.

From breakfast, we wandered into the heart of Lahore—its bustling bazaars alive with color and clamor. Ravi Road was a river of honking rickshaws and street sellers waving their goods, a living artery pulsing through the city’s heart. We passed carts stacked with guavas dusted in chaat masala, baskets of blood-red pomegranates, and stalls where the smoke of grilling kebabs curled upward like silent prayers. The sound of hammering metal mixed with the jingling of bangles, the soft cooing of pigeons echoing from the domes above.

Children ran between the carts, laughter cutting through the chaos. Somewhere, a qawwal’s voice rose above the noise, raw and soul-deep, singing verses of love and loss. I found myself pausing for a moment, feeling the rhythm of the city—its endless dance between life and decay, beauty and ruin. Abdul caught me staring and said with a grin, “You’re thinking too much again. Maybe the ghosts of Lahore are already whispering to you.” I laughed it off, though something in his tone stayed with me.

For lunch, Diljeet led us through winding alleys to a decades-old tandoor tucked away near the Shahi Mosque. The place had no signboard, no advertisement—only the rich aroma of its food to guide loyal customers. We squeezed into a low table beside a flickering lantern. The walls were lined with sepia photographs of Lahore from another era—rickshaws with wooden wheels, horse carriages, men in sherwanis and topis. The cook, an elderly man with hennaed beard and wrinkled hands, greeted Diljeet like an old friend.

Plates arrived—butter chicken simmered to perfection, naan that was soft in the middle and crisp at the edges, and a platter of seekh kebabs sizzling hot from the tandoor. The butter chicken’s rich, spiced gravy clung to the naan, each bite warming us against the winter chill. The aroma of charcoal smoke and roasted meat filled the tiny room, mingling with the sound of the mosque’s distant call to prayer. Peter, in between bites, joked that he could give up ghost hunting entirely if someone promised him this meal every day. Abdul countered that no food in the world could match the thrill of

seeing a ghost flee before sunrise. We laughed, the sound echoing off the narrow walls like a song from another lifetime.

We lingered there longer than planned, the hum of conversation and the smells of the kitchen wrapping around us like a warm blanket. Outside, Lahore moved on without us—rickshaws rattled past, shopkeepers shouted, and above it all, pigeons circled the sky like tiny gray spirits. When we finally stepped out, the afternoon light had softened, and a gentle wind carried with it the faint sweetness of blooming narcissus from someone's garden nearby.

As we strolled toward the old food street near Badshahi Mosque, the world around us seemed to shift—slower, more dreamlike. Street performers were beginning to set up along the footpaths: a young boy balancing a spinning plate, a man with a monkey wearing a small red vest, and an old calligrapher who wrote names on grains of rice. The air shimmered with golden dust, and the distant minarets glowed against the fading light.

For evening tea, we stopped at a roadside stall serving samosas, pakoras, and tall glasses of doodh patti chai. The stall was little more than a wooden cart under a flickering bulb, but the smells alone could draw a crowd. The samosas were crisp triangles of perfection, the potato filling fragrant with coriander and cumin. The pakoras, dunked fresh from bubbling oil, scalded our tongues in the most delightful way.

Somewhere nearby, a young man strummed a guitar, his voice carrying a melody that blended with the distant call to prayer. There was something almost haunting about it—an echo that seemed to ripple through the air, neither wholly sad nor entirely peaceful. For a moment, I caught Abdul staring off toward the shadowy outline of an old, crumbling haveli in the distance. Its arched windows were dark, and a faint breeze stirred the tattered curtains within.

"What is it?" I asked quietly.

He blinked, as though waking from a trance. "Nothing," he said, forcing a smile. "Just thought I saw something move inside."

"Probably a pigeon," Diljeet said, chuckling. But when I glanced back, I could have sworn one of the curtains twitched again, though no wind touched my face. I said nothing.

Night fell quickly, and with it, Lahore seemed to bloom in a different way. The city's lights flickered on, casting the streets in a warm, amber glow. Lanterns hung over the food stalls, their soft

flames trembling like restless souls. We made our way to Fort Road Food Street, where the aroma of charcoal and spices filled the air with a richness that could make one forget the cold.

Dinner was a feast: grilled fish coated in masala, mutton karahi cooked in a wok over open flame, and fresh parathas layered with ghee until they glistened. Steam rose in delicate curls, and the laughter of nearby diners mingled with the sizzling of pans. We ate slowly, letting the warmth seep through our fingers and into our bones. Peter began to tell a story about a haunting in Sahiwal, but halfway through, his voice faltered—he said he felt as though someone was standing behind him. When we turned, there was no one there. Just the shimmer of lantern light on old brick walls.

From the rooftop restaurant, the Badshahi Mosque rose in the distance, its domes glowing softly against the indigo sky. The sight silenced us for a moment. The call of a distant muezzin floated on the cold air, solemn and eternal. It made me think of how small we were in the grand scheme of history, yet how strange it was that our brief lives had somehow been chosen to face the supernatural—to confront what others denied.

At exactly 10:00 p.m., we left the bustling streets behind and began the walk back to Diljeet's home. The roads were quieter now, the rickshaws fewer, the shop shutters half-closed. Street dogs barked in the distance. Somewhere, a clock tower struck ten, its chime echoing through the empty lanes. The air grew colder, wrapping us in a silent warning. I noticed the same crumbling haveli from earlier as we passed. Its upper balcony was lit faintly—as though by candlelight—but when I blinked, it vanished. I chose to ignore it.

Inside, the warmth of home welcomed us again. We sank into the cushions in the living room, talking softly while the city outside settled into slumber. The room smelled faintly of sandalwood and smoke from the fireplace. Peter stretched on the couch, Abdul curled up in the armchair, Amit lay across the carpet with his jacket for a pillow. Diljeet switched off the last light and murmured goodnight.

The laughter and flavors of the day still lingered in my mind as I closed my eyes. Outside, the city sighed beneath its winter blanket. Somewhere far away, a dog barked once—and then, from the direction of the old haveli, came the faint echo of a woman's sob.

I told myself it was only the wind.

But the wind, that night, carried a voice I had heard before.

Whispers of Skeletons in Kailash Valley

The next morning, Diljeet's house in Lahore was alive with the smell of fresh parathas and the faint sound of traffic drifting in from the street. Winter sunlight poured through the lace curtains, bathing the living room in a soft, golden glow. But despite the warmth, there was something in the air—an invisible tension that clung to us like an unspoken secret.

We had spent the previous day laughing, eating, and wandering the city like carefree men. But today felt different. The joy of reunion had given way to a strange undercurrent of unease. One by one, we gathered in the sitting room—Amit, Peter, Abdul, Diljeet, and me—cups of steaming chai in our hands, as though fortifying ourselves for whatever words were about to be spoken.

The fire crackled faintly in the corner. No one spoke at first. Outside, the world moved as usual: a vendor's bell rang somewhere in the street, a rickshaw sputtered by, and the faint laughter of children echoed from the alley. Yet inside those four walls, everything felt suspended, as if time itself held its breath.

Amit broke the silence, his voice almost a whisper. "Have you read the latest? It's all over the papers and the local TV bulletins," he said, his eyes darting toward the stack of newspapers on the table. His tone was calm, but I could hear the unease beneath it.

Peter frowned, setting his cup down. "What's it about this time? Another haunted mansion? Or a cursed tomb?"

Amit didn't answer immediately. Instead, he reached for the newspaper, unfolding it with deliberate slowness. The paper crinkled in his hands, the sound unnervingly loud against the silence of the room. He spread it open on the table, his eyes scanning the front page before he turned it toward us.

The headline glared back in thick, black letters:

WALKING DEAD IN KAILASH – Locals Claim Cursed Skeletons Rising from Graves

The words seemed almost absurd, something out of a cheap horror magazine. But Amit's face was grave as he began to read aloud, his voice steady but low.

"Residents of the remote Kailash Valley, near the foothills of the Karakoram Range, have reported terrifying sightings over the past three nights. According to witnesses, skeletal figures have been seen

walking through the village graveyard after sunset. Several villagers claim to have found disturbed graves and broken coffins by dawn. Local elders believe it is divine punishment for forgotten sins—an ancient curse reawakening after centuries."

He paused, his eyes flicking across the rest of the report. "Many families have fled. Only a few remain, praying for mercy."

The words hung in the air like a chill. Even the fire's warmth seemed to fade.

Peter exhaled slowly, leaning back in his chair. His normally playful face was pale. "Skeletons don't just walk... not unless..." He trailed off, unable to finish the thought.

Abdul's deep voice broke through the quiet. "That's what they said about Nawabshah's ghost," he reminded him, "and we all know how that ended."

The room fell into silence again. The ticking of the wall clock suddenly felt deafening, marking each passing second with an echo that seemed to reach into our bones.

Diljeet leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, eyes sharp and thoughtful. "We need to see this for ourselves," he said firmly. "If people are truly haunted—if they're living in fear—then it's our job to help. We didn't walk through the fires of Nawabshah just to turn our backs now."

I looked at each of them in turn. Their faces, lit by the soft morning light, carried the marks of both fatigue and resolve. We had all seen too much to dismiss such a story as mere superstition. Somewhere deep down, we knew—if the call had come to us, there must be a reason.

Over the months that followed our first haunting, we had become something more than ordinary men. We were seekers of truth—explorers of what lay beyond the veil of the living world. As the steam rose from our cups and the headlines glared between us, I felt that strange pull again, the same one that had led us before into dark, forsaken places where reason dared not follow.

Our journey had not been one of chance alone; it had been shaped by courage, faith, and the unshakable bond of friendship. What had started as a reckless adventure the previous winter had now become something far greater—a calling. We had faced the restless spirit in Nawabshah, stood in the cold silence of abandoned villages, and watched the impossible take form before our eyes. The memory of that night still haunted me—the whispers through the

fog, the shadows that moved without wind, and the moment when the unseen finally found peace through our hands.

Each of us carried his own way of looking at the work. Amit, the quiet thinker, often searched for meaning in every haunting, believing the dead spoke to the living not to terrify but to be understood. His notebook, always with him, was filled with sketches and notes of every case we had touched. To him, every haunting was a message waiting to be deciphered.

Peter, lighthearted yet brave, saw our mission as both duty and destiny. He joked often, as though humor could shield him from fear, but when the hour turned dark, he stood firm like a soldier at his post. His laughter had carried us through countless nights when the weight of silence grew too heavy.

Abdul was our anchor—steady, grounded, and unshakable in faith. He prayed before every journey, reciting verses to guard us from what lay unseen. To him, every haunting was a battle between darkness and light, and he believed that truth, once spoken, could banish even the most stubborn of shadows.

Diljeet, whose home had become our sanctuary, carried the role of a leader without ever claiming it. He was the planner, the voice of reason when fear began to cloud our judgment. His resolve sharpened whenever doubt threatened to weaken us. There was something in his eyes—something that hinted he had seen loss long before our adventures began, and that loss had turned into his quiet strength.

And then there was me. The observer. The recorder of our tales. I watched them all, wondering if we were merely chasing ghosts or if something greater had chosen us—some unseen force guiding our steps toward souls that could not rest. I didn't have Abdul's faith or Amit's insight, but I had begun to believe that our paths were written long before we took them.

Experience had given us more than courage. It had taught us patience, wisdom, and the ability to listen—to the silence of an abandoned corridor, to the whispers of a grieving soul, and even to one another's unspoken fears. We had learned that not every spirit was cruel, not every haunting was a curse. Sometimes, the dead cried out not for revenge, but for release—for peace denied to them by the living.

There had been nights when we stood in complete darkness, hearing nothing but our own breathing, and still, we felt the

presence of something watching. There had been mornings when we walked away from a haunted site, our hearts heavy, knowing that not every story ended with light. But through it all, we had never turned away.

As Amit folded the newspaper and placed it back on the table, a gust of wind brushed against the windowpane, rattling it softly. The sound startled no one—we had all grown too familiar with such things.

“So,” Peter said finally, breaking the silence. “Kailash Valley, then?”

Diljeet nodded once. “We’ll leave tomorrow at dawn.”

Abdul offered a quiet prayer under his breath, while Amit reached for his pen, already jotting down notes—routes, supplies, contacts. I sat back, staring at the fading headline, and felt that same chill from the night before creep up my spine.

Outside, the city carried on as though nothing had changed. But inside Diljeet’s house, five men knew that something had begun.

The laughter of yesterday felt distant now, replaced by purpose. Somewhere, far beyond the golden streets of Lahore, the dead were stirring—and whether out of mercy or destiny, it was once again upon us to face them.

The morning light dimmed slightly as a cloud passed over the sun. For a moment, the room seemed to darken, and in that half-shadow, I could have sworn I heard a faint echo, like bones shifting under the earth.

Perhaps it was my imagination. Or perhaps, the valley had already begun to call our names.

The Decision that Could Cause Disaster

As all five friends got experience in ghost hunting as well as bringing peace to the suffering, our past encounters had forged us into something more than ordinary men. What began as a spontaneous adventure, driven partly by curiosity and partly by courage, had slowly become a path we could no longer turn away from. Each haunting we faced brought not only danger and fear but also a chance to restore balance between the living and the dead.

We remembered clearly how it all started—the night in Nawabshah when the air itself had seemed to breathe with the cries of a lost soul. That night was cold and restless, the kind of night when even the stars seem to tremble. The air had been thick with silence, the ground covered in fog so dense that even our flashlights struggled to pierce it. At that time, we were uncertain, frightened even, unsure whether we were strong enough to confront the unseen. But together, we had stood against the darkness, our hearts beating as one as the spirit's sorrow spilled through the air like a storm of grief. And when it was over, when the whispers had faded and the wind had finally stilled, we had known—something inside us had changed.

That victory was more than survival; it was a revelation. We had seen firsthand that the world was vast, mysterious, and often burdened by sorrow that lingered beyond the grave. It was not just the living who suffered; sometimes the dead carried pain far longer than life itself allowed. That night had shown us that courage was not about the absence of fear, but the will to walk through it together.

From that night onward, every step became a chapter in our journey. We did not call ourselves heroes, nor did we seek fame. We were simply men who understood suffering, men who could not turn away when others lived in fear. There were moments when exhaustion weighed on us, when the unknown pressed too close, when our faith trembled. But the bond between us deepened with every haunting we faced. Around the fire, in moments of rare rest, we often spoke of how destiny had chosen us. None of us believed it was by chance alone that we were brought together.

Amit, thoughtful and patient, was the one who often tried to understand the meaning behind each haunting. His calm mind

could turn chaos into reason. To him, the supernatural was not merely about fear, but about messages left unfinished. He believed that every spirit had a story, and in those stories lay the reason for its unrest. He would sit for hours in silence, his eyes fixed on the smallest clues—the creak of a wooden floor, a faded photograph, a line of words scratched into a wall. His questions often guided the group into searching deeper, not just for the *how*, but for the *why*.

Peter, with his lighthearted nature, provided balance. He laughed easily, joked in the face of shadows, and brought courage when silence became too heavy. There were times when his humor felt like a spark in a void, reminding us that we were still alive, still human, no matter how close we came to the unknown. Yet beneath his jokes was a heart that felt deeply. He would often mask his fear behind a smile, but his loyalty never wavered. When the air turned cold and unseen footsteps echoed in the dark, Peter was always the one to stand his ground first. He reminded us that laughter itself was a weapon, a way to keep despair from entering our souls.

Abdul, grounded in faith, became our shield in moments of uncertainty. When evil seemed strongest, it was his voice in prayer that gave us courage. His words carried the weight of belief, cutting through fear like a blade through fog. He believed deeply that no darkness could stand before truth, and no curse could withstand the power of a sincere heart. I remember one night, deep in an abandoned shrine, when shadows moved like living things. Fear had gripped us all until Abdul began to recite verses, his voice steady and strong. Slowly, the air shifted—the cold retreated, and a sense of peace settled over us. His strength lay not in weapons or words, but in the calm certainty of his faith.

Diljeet, warm and steadfast, had always been the one to bring us together. His home was our meeting place, a sanctuary where we could rest and gather strength. He was a man of quiet confidence, and when others faltered, his steady gaze could restore our will. There was something about him—a mix of reason and empathy—that made him a natural leader. He never commanded us, yet his voice always carried weight. He believed that courage was not just facing danger but carrying others through it. His resolve gave the group direction, and when confusion threatened to divide us, it was his hand that guided us back to unity.

And then there was I, the one who witnessed each of us—the observer, the chronicler, the one who wrote down our stories so

they would not be forgotten. I felt that fate had bound the five of us together for a reason far greater than we yet understood. Sometimes, when silence fell after a haunting was resolved, I wondered if we were chosen not merely by chance, but by the very spirits we helped. Perhaps they saw in us something they once were —men searching for purpose in a world too quick to forget its dead.

Our experience grew not only in strength but in wisdom. We came to see that not every haunting was born of anger or malice. Many spirits were not monsters, but victims—souls who longed for peace, who cried out not to harm, but to be heard. We learned to listen—to the silence, to dreams, to the whispers that lingered in the cold air of abandoned houses. Some spoke in signs, some through echoes of memory, and some through nothing more than a feeling that brushed against the edge of thought.

Each time we brought peace, the gratitude of the living was matched by a strange calm in the air, as though the very world sighed with relief. Families could return to their homes, children could sleep without fear, and villages once abandoned could breathe again. We would often stand in those quiet aftermaths, surrounded by the smell of earth and incense, feeling something shift inside us—a weight lifted, not just from the haunted, but from ourselves. With every life restored to peace, the five friends knew our work was not in vain.

Still, we also learned that ghost hunting was not only about courage but about patience. Nights spent in crumbling ruins, hours waiting in silence, days traveling into valleys forgotten by time—all of these were part of the burden. There were times when hunger gnawed, when fatigue numbed our senses, and when the line between the living and the dead blurred in our minds. Yet not one of us wished to turn back. We had accepted our purpose, even if it meant leaving behind comfort and ease. The unknown had become our teacher, and fear itself, our companion.

Winter returned, wrapping the world once more in cold silence. In Lahore, we sat together again, sharing food, laughter, and memories. The city outside buzzed with life—the aroma of roasted corn filled the streets, and the faint sounds of evening prayers drifted through the window. Yet beneath the warmth of reunion lay the unspoken truth—we knew that somewhere, even now, another spirit suffered. Somewhere, people were living in fear, waiting for hope to arrive. And when the call came, when whispers of the next

haunting reached our ears, we would rise again.

We had stopped questioning why. We no longer needed to. For we were not merely men anymore. We were seekers of truth, guardians of peace, and companions bound not only by friendship but by the duty we had embraced. Experience had made us wiser, suffering had made us stronger, and together, we had become a light in places where shadows lingered longest.

And as all five friends gained more experience in ghost hunting as well as in bringing peace to the suffering, we knew this was no longer just a chapter in our lives—it was our story, our destiny, and our path forward into the unknown. The road ahead would not be easy, but none of us feared it. For wherever there was darkness, we would go—armed not with weapons, but with faith, unity, and the unyielding will to bring peace where none remained.

The Journey towards Darkness

The cold morning air bit at our faces as we stepped out of Diljeet's house at dawn. The city was still half-asleep, the streets slick with dew, and only the echo of our footsteps and the occasional rickshaw passing broke the silence. Each of us carried a small bag, packed with only the essentials—flashlights, rope, blessed talismans, and a few tools that had saved our lives more than once in the past. None of us spoke much. Words felt heavy that morning, as though even sound itself feared what lay ahead.

The Lahore Railway Station loomed ahead, its grand colonial arches bathed in the orange glow of early sunlight. Porters shouted in tired voices, steam rose in ghostly wisps from idling engines, and pigeons fluttered across the high ceiling beams. The scent of coal smoke, diesel, and fried parathas from nearby stalls mingled in the chilly air. Somewhere down the platform, the Karakoram Express hissed like a restless serpent, its long carriages lined up as though awaiting judgment.

As we approached, the whistle blew—long, mournful, and almost human in tone. I caught Diljeet's eyes; he gave a slight nod. Without a word, we boarded. The moment my foot touched the metal step, a faint vibration ran up my leg—a pulse, like a heartbeat. I couldn't shake the feeling that the train itself knew where we were going—and didn't approve.

Inside, the compartment was dim despite the daylight outside. The windows were fogged from the cold, and the lights overhead flickered occasionally, humming softly. Shadows pooled in the corners, stretching and shrinking with each passing jolt of the train. We took our seats together—five friends bound by fate and by what we had seen in places the world preferred to forget. Around us, other passengers sat in uneasy quiet. A woman in the opposite seat kept her eyes fixed on the floor, clutching her shawl tightly around her shoulders. A man by the window murmured prayers under his breath, the beads of his rosary slipping quickly through trembling fingers.

When the whistle blew again and the train lurched forward, the sound echoed through the carriage like a cry from another world. It was as though Lahore itself exhaled, letting us go into the unknown.

The city slipped away quickly, the familiar sights dissolving into

mist and fields. Half an hour into the journey, I noticed the light outside had changed. It should have been bright by now, but the sun seemed dulled, its rays smothered behind a grayish veil. The world beyond the glass appeared drained of color—trees looked skeletal, the land stretched barren, and the sky carried a strange metallic sheen.

Peter leaned closer, his voice barely above a whisper. “Do you feel it?” he asked. “The air... it’s heavier the further we go.”

I nodded. I could feel it too—the faint pressure, like invisible hands pushing against our chests. A presence. Something watching.

Then came the sound. Footsteps. Soft, slow, deliberate—moving along the narrow corridor behind us. Each step fell out of rhythm with the train’s motion, too steady, too alive. I turned my head sharply, heart pounding, but when I looked back, the corridor was empty. The lights there flickered once, twice, then steadied. The footsteps had stopped.

And the train rolled on.

We tried to distract ourselves with quiet conversation, but every attempt seemed to falter. Each time one of us spoke, the carriage answered with groans and sighs, the sound echoing through the metal as if the train itself resented the intrusion of human voices.

An hour passed. The rhythmic clatter of wheels on rails should have been comforting, but instead it felt like a lullaby sung by something ancient and restless. Shadows seemed to move where they shouldn’t, and from time to time, I thought I saw faint reflections in the glass beside me—faces that didn’t belong to anyone in the carriage.

Somewhere down the row, a baby began to cry. The thin, high-pitched sound sliced through the stillness, echoing like a warning. Its mother—a frail woman wrapped in a faded shawl—tried to hush it, whispering words I couldn’t catch. When her eyes met mine, my blood ran cold. They were empty—not lifeless, but hollow, as if the soul inside had already left.

Amit forced a chuckle, his tone strained. “Maybe we’re all just imagining things. Long trip, early morning... the mind plays tricks, you know.”

But then Peter, sitting by the window, went rigid. His knuckles whitened on the armrest. “Look outside,” he murmured. “Now.”

I turned my gaze to the window.

The world outside had changed again. The fields were no longer

fields—just stretches of uneven ground, scattered with dark mounds. No crops, no trees, no signs of life. Just soil turned over in patches, like graves dug and forgotten. And there—just for a heartbeat—I saw it.

A figure. Tall, thin, and pale as ash. It stood motionless among the mounds, watching the train with hollow eyes that glowed faintly against the gloom. I couldn't make out its face, only the impression of bones beneath translucent skin. As the train thundered past, the figure blurred, but its eyes—those sunken, burning eyes—seemed to follow us, unblinking.

Abdul leaned forward, his voice trembling. "It can't be—"

Before he could finish, the train gave a violent jolt. The car shook, metal screeched, and we were thrown against our seats. The lights flickered once, twice, then went out completely. For one terrible moment, there was silence. No engine. No wheels. No sound of breath. Just a suffocating stillness.

Then, as suddenly as it had stopped, the train came roaring back to life. The whistle screamed, and the carriage lights returned, but dimmer now—almost reddish, as if tainted by rust. The other passengers looked shaken, but not one spoke. Their faces were blank, resigned. As if they had expected this.

Peter's voice came out hoarse. "We're not even in the valley yet... so how is it reaching us already?"

No one answered.

Amit pressed his palms together, muttering something under his breath. Abdul clutched the small prayer beads in his hand, eyes closed. Diljeet sat rigid, staring straight ahead, his jaw tight. I could feel it too—the dread creeping in, the weight pressing harder with every passing mile.

Outside, the scenery grew stranger. The trees that lined the tracks twisted unnaturally, their branches curling inward like claws. The sky dimmed until it looked bruised. Occasionally, sparks flared from the tracks, brief flashes of orange in the growing gray.

At one point, I looked down the corridor again. A figure stood at the far end—motionless, facing us. I blinked, and it was gone.

"Did you see—" I started.

"Yes," Diljeet cut in sharply, his voice low. "Don't talk about it. Not here."

The hours dragged by, each one heavier than the last. The train rattled on, carrying us deeper into the north, into a silence that

seemed to swallow the world. Every few minutes, the whistle wailed again—too long, too mournful—as though warning whatever lay ahead that we were coming.

By midday, the temperature had dropped sharply. Frost began to form on the window edges, and the passengers huddled into their coats. The baby's cries had stopped long ago, and now the mother sat still as stone, her head bowed.

Then, faintly, from somewhere near the engine, came the sound of knocking. Slow. Hollow. Like hands beating against a coffin lid. Once. Twice. Thrice.

We all froze. Even the air seemed to stop moving.

The knocking came again—closer this time. And then, as if in answer, the train whistle screamed once more, louder, shriller, almost alive.

Outside, the landscape was changing again. The hills in the distance loomed like giants under the shrouded sun. The land grew darker, the tracks curving toward the mountains where the Kailash Valley waited—silent, ancient, and cursed.

And as the train carried us onward, I couldn't shake the sense that something unseen had already joined us—that we were no longer just five friends on a journey, but travelers caught in the pull of something far greater.

Something that was waiting for us.

Voices at the Last Station

The Karakoram Express screeched into Rawalpindi just past midday, the air outside colder and thinner than it had been in Lahore. The station bustled with vendors shouting, porters weaving through crowds, and the distant hiss of steam from another departing train. Yet beneath the surface, something felt off. People hurried past as if chased by an unseen urgency, their eyes constantly flicking toward the north—the direction of the mountains, where the air turned blue and thin, and where the unknown waited.

The cries of vendors—“chai garam, samosa, biscuit!”—echoed against the old stone walls, but the usual energy of the crowd seemed hollow, forced. The faint clang of metal echoed from the rail yards beyond, and a whistle blew somewhere far away, long and mournful, like a cry swallowed by distance.

We stepped onto the platform, stretching our stiff legs. The smell of coal smoke and frying oil drifted through the air, but it did little to warm us. A thin fog hung over the tracks, curling around the wheels of stationary trains and softening the edges of everything it touched. Even the light seemed duller here, caught in a strange half-glow that never felt like day.

As we discussed our next leg of the journey—jeeps that would take us up toward Chitral—a man appeared from the fog. He was old, wrapped in a thick woolen shawl, his beard white and coarse, his eyes dark and ancient. There was something about him that made time slow. He stopped in front of us, his gaze sharp, unblinking.

“You’re going north,” he said—not as a question, but as a statement carved in stone.

None of us replied at first. His tone left no room for pretense. Finally, Diljeet nodded. “We are.”

The old man studied each of us in turn, his eyes seeming to pierce deeper than our faces—into our thoughts, our fears, our intentions. When he spoke again, his voice had dropped to a low, grave murmur. “Turn back,” he said. “The roads aren’t safe. Not from snow. Not from what walks at night.”

Amit frowned. “What walks at night?”

The man’s lips tightened, and for a moment he seemed to weigh whether to speak at all. Then he leaned closer, his breath misting in

the cold air. “The dead,” he whispered. “They’ve left their graves. Not just in your cursed valley, but along the roads, in the forests, near the streams. They move after sunset, looking for... company.”

The noise of the station seemed to fade, swallowed by the echo of those words.

Peter gave a nervous chuckle that didn’t reach his eyes. “We’ve dealt with the dead before.”

The old man’s gaze didn’t waver. “Not like these,” he said. “These don’t talk. They don’t listen. They don’t forgive.”

And with that, he turned and slipped into the crowd, vanishing between vendors and porters as though the fog itself had swallowed him.

Abdul exhaled slowly, his breath visible in the cold air. “We’re still going, right?”

No one answered. But the silence that followed was answer enough.

Minutes later, we were in the back of a battered jeep parked outside the station. The driver—a wiry man with wind-burned skin and a permanent squint—loaded our bags without a word. His vehicle looked as though it had survived a war: the metal dented, the paint faded, one of the headlights cracked. He slammed the rear door shut, gave a curt nod, and climbed into the front seat. The engine coughed to life with a cloud of black smoke, and the jeep shuddered before lurching forward.

The road ahead wound into the mountains, into the lands where winter lingered longer than life. The tarmac ended quickly, replaced by a dirt track carved precariously into the hillsides. Loose stones crumbled beneath the tires, tumbling into ravines where the fog swallowed them whole. Each turn seemed to carry us higher, deeper, away from the world we knew.

At first, the view was breathtaking—rolling valleys, streams glinting like silver threads. But as we climbed, the beauty gave way to barrenness. Trees grew sparse, their branches black and twisted against the gray sky. The air thinned, the clouds hung lower, and the sunlight dimmed until it seemed like dusk though it was barely afternoon.

Inside the jeep, the only sounds were the groan of the engine, the creak of the suspension, and the occasional slide of gravel beneath the tires. We spoke little. Each of us was lost in thought, replaying the old man’s warning in our minds. The higher we went,

the heavier the silence became—until it was almost physical, pressing against our throats, making it hard to breathe.

Peter broke it first. “You think he was trying to scare us off?”

Amit stared out the window. “Maybe. Or maybe he was just the only one brave enough to tell the truth.”

The driver said nothing. His hands gripped the wheel so tightly his knuckles were white. I caught his reflection in the rearview mirror once—his eyes flicked toward us briefly, then back to the road. There was fear there, real fear, and not the kind born from superstition.

The track narrowed, twisting through cliffs that rose like jagged teeth on either side. The drop beyond the edge was sheer—hundreds of feet straight down. More than once, Peter flinched as the jeep skidded near the side, his hand instinctively clutching the door handle. Abdul whispered a prayer under his breath, his voice steady but low. The rhythm of his words filled the small space like a fragile shield.

As we climbed, the wind grew stronger, carrying with it strange sounds—the moan of distant rocks, the rustle of unseen movement among the stones. Once, far off, a sound like a human cry echoed through the valley, carried and stretched by the wind until it became something else—something wrong.

“Did anyone hear that?” Peter asked.

“Just the wind,” Diljeet said quickly, though his eyes didn’t leave the darkening path ahead.

But I wasn’t sure. There was something in that cry—a tone of despair, of hunger—that didn’t belong to any wind.

An hour later, the fog thickened. The world outside turned to gray shapes and shadows. The headlights carved narrow tunnels through the mist, illuminating only fragments of the road. Rocks, branches, and sometimes—just for a second—figures that looked too still to be alive.

Amit shifted uneasily. “Does anyone else feel it?” he asked. “Like we’re being followed?”

The words hung in the air, unwelcomed but true. The feeling had been there for miles now—a presence just beyond sight.

Abdul’s voice rose again, steadier this time, his prayer filling the air. The driver’s hand trembled slightly on the wheel.

Then, without warning, the jeep’s headlights caught something standing by the roadside.

It was tall—taller than any man—and thin to the point of emaciation. Its skin, or what passed for it, hung like parchment over bone. The wind tugged at its tattered cloak, and beneath the hood, two faintly glowing eyes stared directly at us.

For a fraction of a second, our gazes met. The jeep roared past, but that image—those eyes, hollow and ancient—burned into memory.

No one spoke. No one breathed.

After several moments, Peter whispered, “Tell me someone else saw that.”

No one answered.

The road narrowed again, hugging the mountain. Darkness began to seep into the sky though it was still early evening. The air grew colder, each breath visible in thin, ghostly streams. The driver muttered something in Pashto—something that sounded like a prayer or a plea—and pressed harder on the accelerator.

The higher we went, the more the world below disappeared. Villages faded into mist, their smoke trails vanishing like lost memories. Even the sound of the engine seemed muffled, swallowed by the mountain’s immense silence.

At last, we reached a narrow ridge where the wind screamed like a living thing. The jeep rattled over loose stones, the headlights trembling across the dark landscape. I glanced out of the window—and froze.

In the valley below, something was moving.

Not one thing, but many. Dozens. Maybe hundreds. Slow, staggering shapes rising from the earth itself, their pale forms glinting faintly in the dying light. The dead were walking—not a story, not a rumor—but a sight too real to deny.

The jeep kept climbing, its wheels slipping on the frozen dirt. None of us spoke. None of us dared to. The valley below grew smaller, but the sense of dread grew larger, wrapping around us like the cold.

By the time the first stars appeared, one truth had settled among us—silent, certain, unshakable.

Whatever waited in Kailash Valley was no longer content to wait. It was already awake.

And it knew we were coming.

Journey Beyond the Mountain Road

The jeep rattled and groaned as it climbed out of Rawalpindi, every turn winding us deeper into the mountain passes. Its old suspension creaked like bones in the cold, yet somehow it kept moving, faithful to the road even when the gravel beneath threatened to betray us. Our driver, Karim, a wiry man with sharp eyes and a scarf wrapped tightly around his neck, seemed born for these roads. His hands gripped the wheel with effortless familiarity, guiding the jeep with the instinct of someone who had driven these treacherous curves since childhood. Yet every so often, his gaze flicked toward the crumbling edges where the earth fell away into dizzying drops. Those brief glances were enough to make us tighten our grips on the seats, laughter masking the nervousness that we all secretly felt.

The sun dipped low behind the towering ridges, its last rays washing the peaks in molten gold. Shadows stretched long over the valleys, while the breeze that swept through the windows carried the resinous scent of pine mixed with something else—something sharp, crisp, almost sweet, like a promise of the untouched wilderness ahead.

Amit leaned out of the window, his scarf fluttering wildly in the wind. Stretching his arms wide, he shouted over the engine's roar, "Smell that? That's the smell of freedom!"

Peter wrinkled his nose dramatically. "Smells like petrol and dust to me," he muttered, sending the rest of us into a fit of laughter. Even Karim allowed himself the faintest curl of a smile, though his eyes never left the road.

Every now and then, Karim raised a hand from the wheel to point out wonders along the way. He showed us ancient stone watchtowers perched high on impossible cliffs, silent sentinels of empires long gone. He nodded toward villages nestled in the folds of the mountains, where barefoot children waved furiously and ran alongside the jeep until they disappeared in clouds of dust. Once, he slowed to let us admire a waterfall that poured like liquid glass down a jagged rock face, its spray sparkling in the fading sunlight.

We begged him to stop.

The moment the jeep rolled to a halt, we were tumbling out, boots crunching against the gravel. The air was colder here, filled with the roar of water and the scent of wet stone. We took turns

snapping photos, trying to capture the wild beauty around us though the camera could never do it justice. Then came the dares. Diljeet, never one to back down, thrust his hands into the water with a loud yelp. “It’s colder than your freezer, Ahmed!” he cried, shaking droplets onto all of us.

That set off a round of challenges—who could keep their hand in the longest, who dared splash their face with it, who would drink from it. In the end, our laughter bounced off the cliffs, startling a pair of goats that clambered up the rocks with casual ease, reminding us how clumsy we humans were in comparison.

By the time we piled back into the jeep, the warmth of camaraderie filled the small space. Peter, always the storyteller, launched into a ridiculous tale about how mountain goats were actually “secret assassins,” trained by locals to push unwary travelers off cliffs. He mimicked a goat’s bleating so convincingly that Amit doubled over with laughter, gasping for breath. Even Karim, usually stone-faced, shook his head with amusement as he guided the jeep back onto the road.

The climb grew steeper, the path narrower. Now there was a wall of rock pressing close on one side and a terrifying emptiness yawning on the other. The thrill of it pulsed through us—part fear, part exhilaration. When the jeep jolted suddenly over a loose stone, Amit let out a scream so theatrical that we couldn’t stop laughing for minutes afterward. His dramatics became the highlight of the evening, replayed again and again with new embellishments until even Karim chuckled aloud.

As the last of the daylight slipped away, the mountains transformed. Their rugged edges softened into silhouettes, vast and dark against an indigo sky. Mist crept into the valleys, weaving like pale smoke, hiding entire villages from sight. Above us, the first stars pierced the deepening twilight, sharp and cold, scattered across the heavens like shards of broken glass.

The ride became quieter. Our laughter faded into soft conversation, and eventually into silence as each of us gazed out at the vastness surrounding us. The immensity of the mountains humbled us; their sheer size made us feel both small and strangely significant, as though the world itself was watching.

After an hour or two, Karim finally spoke. “We’ll reach Chitral before midnight if the roads stay clear.” His voice was calm but carried a note of fatigue. The headlights cast twin beams through

the darkness, catching glimpses of motion—sometimes a fox darting away, sometimes just the wind stirring branches that looked eerily human in the dim light.

The higher we went, the colder it grew. Frost began to form on the edges of the windshield, spiderwebbing outward in delicate patterns. We rubbed our hands together, breathing into our palms, but the cold was relentless. It crept through the metal frame, through our jackets, through our bones.

At one point, Karim slowed the jeep. Ahead, the fog thickened so much that the road vanished into a white curtain. He leaned forward, squinting, muttering something under his breath in Pashto. His knuckles tightened around the steering wheel.

"What is it?" Abdul asked.

Karim didn't answer right away. The jeep crawled forward, the engine groaning softly. Then he said, "There's a bridge ahead. Old one. Only one jeep at a time."

The headlights soon revealed it—a narrow wooden bridge strung across a chasm so deep that even the beam of light couldn't find the bottom. The boards looked ancient, slick with frost. The wind whistled through the gaps, a mournful sound that made the hairs on the back of my neck rise.

We held our breath as the jeep crept onto it. Each plank groaned under the weight, and for a moment, it felt as if the entire world was holding still. The wheels trembled, the suspension squealed, and the abyss below seemed to whisper. Then, just as the last tire reached solid ground, one of the boards snapped behind us, splintering into the darkness.

No one spoke for several minutes after that.

When we finally reached flatter terrain, relief washed over us in waves. The fog began to thin, revealing the faint lights of a town nestled at the foot of the next ridge. Chitral.

By the time we rolled into the outskirts, the night had fully claimed the sky. The air was sharper here, cutting through our jackets, forcing us to huddle close as we stepped out of the jeep. The town was subdued, its streets lit only by the glow of oil lamps and the occasional bulb strung across a shopfront. Dogs prowled the alleys, their eyes glinting in the dim light, while smoke curled lazily from chimneys into the starlit dark.

We found a small roadside dhaba, its hearth glowing with orange embers, the smell of sizzling meat pulling us in like moths to

a flame. The owner, a stout man in a woolen cap, served us steaming plates of chapli kebabs—round, spiced, and crackling at the edges—and stacks of hot parathas that flaked apart in our hands. The flavors were bold, fiery, alive, the perfect antidote to the cold that clung to our bones.

We ate under the open sky, the mountains looming in shadow, their presence felt even when unseen. The firelight flickered across our faces, warming us as we shared food, tea, and stories. Our stomachs filled, our laughter rose again, and for that brief moment, it felt as though the mountains themselves had accepted our presence.

A faint wind rustled through the trees, carrying whispers that might have been the sound of distant rivers—or something else entirely. Karim's eyes darted toward the dark slopes beyond the town. "Best get your rest early," he murmured. "The road to Kailash starts at dawn. And it's not a road you take lightly."

His words hung in the cold night air like a warning.

Tomorrow, Kailash awaited. The valley of whispers, of rumors, of shadows. But tonight—it was just five friends, full stomachs, and the kind of laughter that made even the wildest roads feel safe.

Whispers in Chitral

The first rays of sunlight spilled into our small inn room, cutting across the tangle of blankets and the equally tangled shapes of four very reluctant friends. The pale light glowed against the frost that clung to the windowpanes, making the whole room feel colder than it was. The only one up was Diljeet, already dressed, a woolen shawl around his shoulders, sipping chai like a man on a mission. His eyes glimmered with that restless energy that always made him the first one ready for adventure.

"Come on, you lazy lot," he said, clapping his hands with exaggerated cheer. "We've got a mountain to conquer!"

I buried my head under the pillow. "Five more minutes..." My voice was muffled, but Amit's groan from the other bed echoed my sentiment perfectly.

Five minutes became ten, then thirty, until finally Diljeet ripped the blankets away with a victorious laugh. "Up! Or I swear I'll leave you here and climb Kailash myself."

We stumbled out into the streets of Chitral, still rubbing sleep from our eyes, and were immediately greeted by a town alive with morning. The air was crisp and sharp, filled with the mingled scents of freshly baked naan and simmering karahi from roadside stalls. Smoke curled lazily from chimneys, and the calls of vendors rose above the chatter of early shoppers.

We ducked into a small tea house tucked between two larger shops. Its wooden sign swung gently in the morning breeze, and inside, the air was thick with the warmth of brewing chai. The owner, a broad-shouldered man with a thick beard and a smile that seemed to glow as much as the samovar behind him, welcomed us like family. Plates of halwa puri arrived at our table, steaming and golden, and the first bite melted in the mouth.

"This," Peter declared between mouthfuls, "is the real reason we came. Forget mountains. Forget ghosts. Forget danger. I would climb a thousand peaks for another plate of this."

Laughter filled the little tea house, but something about the old wooden beams overhead, blackened by years of smoke, made me feel we were being watched. Not by the locals, but by the very walls themselves, as though they remembered travelers who had sat here before us.

After breakfast, we let the town draw us in. The bazaar was alive with color and sound—stalls brimming with woolen caps, handwoven shawls, glittering gemstones, and copper utensils that caught the morning light like small flames. The scent of spices lingered in the air—cumin, saffron, cardamom—and children darted between stalls, their laughter ringing out like bells.

Amit stopped at one vendor's stall and picked up a Chitrali topi. He bargained with exaggerated drama, switching between English, broken Urdu, and wild gestures until he walked away triumphantly with the cap perched crookedly on his head. He bowed deeply. "Gentlemen, I give you your mountain prince!"

We were still laughing when an elderly man shuffled toward us. At first, I barely noticed him, lost in the noise of the bazaar. But then he stood before us, silent and still, and the world around seemed to dim. His eyes were pale—so pale they looked almost silvery—and they locked onto ours with unsettling intensity.

"You're heading further north," he said. His voice was thin but carried with it an authority that cut through the bustle of the bazaar. It wasn't a question. It was a statement.

The laughter thinned at once. "Yes," I said cautiously. "We are."

The old man nodded slowly, his gaze flickering toward the mountains that loomed in the distance. "The road to Kailash is open... for now. But the higher you go, the more the mountains remember."

Amit smirked nervously, though his voice lacked its usual bravado. "What does that mean?"

The old man's thin lips curved into something that was not quite a smile. "The mountains have their own memory. Some things... they do not forget. Nor do they forgive."

Before we could ask more, he turned and slipped into the moving crowd, vanishing as if he had never been there at all.

For a long moment, we stood in silence, our laughter now hollow echoes. The colors of the bazaar seemed dimmer, the voices quieter. It felt as though we had been pulled out of the flow of life for a heartbeat, made to glimpse something beyond the ordinary.

Peter, never one to leave a silence unbroken, finally spoke. "Well, if the mountains start talking to me, I'm charging them for therapy." He grinned, but it didn't quite reach his eyes.

We laughed—because what else could we do?—but I noticed how each of us glanced back at the spot where the old man had

stood, as though expecting him to return.

The rest of the day we threw ourselves into preparations. We bought warm clothes, thick enough to fight the mountain chill, extra water skins, ropes, and enough dried fruit and nuts to feed a small army. Karim, our driver from the day before, promised to have the jeep ready at dawn. The shopkeepers wished us luck, but their smiles carried an edge of hesitation, as if they knew something we didn't.

At one stall, while paying for lantern oil, I noticed a charm hanging from a nail above the counter—a small bundle of herbs tied with red string. The shopkeeper caught me looking and smiled faintly. "Protection," he said. "For travelers who go where the road ends."

"Does it work?" I asked, half joking.

He didn't laugh. "Sometimes," he said simply, and tucked a smaller charm into my hand. "Take it. You'll need it where you're going."

I started to refuse, but something in his tone stopped me. I slipped it into my pocket.

By evening, we sat on the rooftop of our inn, our bags packed and piled in a corner. The sun sank slowly behind the snowcapped peaks, painting the sky in fire—orange, crimson, and purple streaks fading into the indigo night. The call to prayer drifted faintly through the valley, mingling with the cry of distant birds returning to their nests.

Below us, Chitral pulsed with quiet life—the crackle of hearth fires, the soft murmur of conversation, the faint clatter of dishes from open windows. The wind was colder now, sharp with the promise of higher altitudes. Karim's jeep waited in the alley below, its silhouette stark under the dim glow of a hanging bulb.

Amit leaned back on his elbows. "You know," he said softly, "this feels like the calm before the storm."

No one argued. We just sat there, wrapped in silence, each of us lost in thought. The old man's words still hovered in the back of my mind, like a faint song you can't shake off. *The mountains have their own memory.*

Below, a dog barked once, sharp and distant, then another answered from farther away. The echoes traveled through the dark until they faded into nothing. Somewhere beyond the town, the mountains loomed—black and immense, their snowy crowns

catching the last shimmer of moonlight. For a moment, I thought I saw something move against the ridgeline, something tall and shifting, but when I blinked, it was gone.

Peter noticed me staring and followed my gaze. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” I said quickly, though my heart thudded a little too hard.

He shrugged and leaned back again. “You’re just nervous,” he murmured. “We all are.”

He wasn’t wrong. The laughter, the food, the shopping—all of it had been a way to keep the unease at bay. But now, with night settling in and the road to Kailash waiting, the truth was impossible to ignore. Something awaited us out there—something ancient, patient, and aware.

The stars emerged one by one, cold and brilliant. The fire from a nearby rooftop cast a faint glow on our faces. None of us spoke again for a long time.

Tomorrow, the road to Kailash would begin for real. And though we laughed and joked, deep down, each of us felt it—the journey was already changing. The mountains were listening. And they remembered.

The Road That Climbs to Silence

The road wound upward like a serpent of dust and stone, each turn narrower than the last. The mountains loomed on either side—immense, indifferent, eternal. They seemed less like landscape and more like ancient watchers, their snow-tipped crowns lost in mist. Every now and then, the wind would rush down the ravine, howling through the rocks like a voice half-remembered.

We passed a stretch of road where the cliff face bore strange carvings—faded symbols etched into the rock, their meanings long lost. Spirals, jagged lines, and something that looked like an eye. Diljeet slowed the jeep, curiosity flickering in his eyes. “Old Buddhist markings,” he murmured, though his tone lacked conviction. “Or maybe something older.”

Peter leaned out the window to get a better look, his breath fogging against the cold glass. “I don’t think these were made for prayer,” he said quietly. “Feels more like a warning.”

No one argued.

The silence inside the jeep thickened. Even Bholi’s steady rumble seemed subdued, as though the old machine too sensed the unease in the air. The road twisted along the edge of a gorge so deep it made the stomach twist just looking at it. Far below, a river snaked through the rocks, black and glinting like liquid glass.

At one point, the path narrowed to barely the width of the tires. The cliff to our left rose sheer and gray, while to the right the world fell away into mist. Diljeet’s knuckles whitened on the steering wheel. “If anyone so much as sneezes,” he muttered, “we’re all meeting our ancestors early.”

Amit chuckled nervously, pressing himself against the seat. “Please don’t tempt fate, yaar.”

But the laughter that followed was hollow—too quick, too forced.

We drove for hours, the world outside turning starker, colder. The occasional patch of green gave way to barren stone. The sun climbed high but offered no warmth, its light filtered through a haze that made everything seem dreamlike.

Eventually, we came upon a small cluster of houses clinging to the mountainside—a forgotten village that looked as though it had been carved out of the rock itself. Smoke rose lazily from one

chimney. Children paused in their play to stare as we passed, their eyes wide, faces half-hidden behind scarves.

A woman, wrapped in layers of wool, stood by the roadside with a basket of apples. Diljeet slowed the jeep, and she approached, her gaze flicking between us. Her face was weathered by sun and wind, her eyes sharp and unreadable.

“Where are you heading?” she asked in Urdu, her voice carrying easily over the wind.

“To Kailash Valley,” Amit replied, leaning out slightly.

The woman’s lips pressed into a thin line. “Few go there now,” she said after a moment. “The path beyond Shandur is not what it used to be. The mountain shifts... things are waking.”

Diljeet frowned. “Things?”

But she only shook her head. “If you must go, take this.” She reached into her basket and handed us five small apples—deep red, polished like stone. “For the journey. And remember, if the wind starts to whisper your name, don’t answer.”

The jeep rolled on. None of us spoke for a while. The apples lay on the dashboard, glinting in the pale light like silent omens.

By afternoon, the road grew worse. Loose rocks rattled under the tires, and the jeep shuddered violently as it climbed. We had to stop twice to push it out of patches where the path had crumbled away. The cold seeped into our bones, the air thin enough to make every breath feel like labor.

Peter rubbed his hands together, blowing into them for warmth. “Next time,” he said between breaths, “let’s go somewhere tropical. Haunted beaches, maybe.”

“Haunted coconuts,” Amit replied weakly. “Much safer.”

But even as we tried to joke, something about the air felt wrong —too still, too heavy. The wind had died entirely, and the silence pressed in like a weight.

We rounded another bend, and suddenly, the world seemed to change. The mountains ahead were cloaked in mist, their peaks lost in the clouds. The sky darkened without warning, the sun smothered behind thick gray veils. The road dipped into a narrow gorge where shadows pooled like water.

Diljeet slowed again, frowning. “Strange,” he said softly. “We shouldn’t be this close to the pass yet.”

Amit unfolded the map, but the paper trembled in his hands. “I think we missed a turn,” he muttered. “There should have been a

bridge back there."

Peter turned to look out the rear window. "You mean the bridge that wasn't there?"

We all followed his gaze. The road behind us twisted back into fog—no bridge, no signpost, nothing but gray stone and emptiness.

A faint sound drifted through the gorge then, soft and almost melodic. It wasn't the wind. It was more like a voice—a low, distant hum that rose and fell as if echoing from the cliffs themselves.

"What is that?" I whispered.

No one answered.

The sound grew clearer the deeper we went. It seemed to move around us, sometimes ahead, sometimes behind, threading through the air like breath through hollow bones. The jeep's headlights flickered once, twice, then steadied. The humming stopped.

And in its place came another sound—the slow, deliberate scrape of stone shifting against stone.

Diljeet's eyes darted to the rearview mirror. "Did anyone else hear—"

Before he could finish, the jeep jolted violently. Something had moved across the road—a shadow too fast to catch. The tires screeched as Diljeet slammed the brakes. The jeep skidded sideways, gravel flying.

When it stopped, our hearts were pounding.

Amit was the first to speak. "What was that?!"

None of us knew. Outside, the mist thickened, pressing against the windows like a living thing. Through the blur, I thought I saw a shape—tall and thin, standing motionless by the edge of the road. For a second, it looked like a person. Then the fog swallowed it whole.

We sat there in silence, barely breathing.

Finally, Peter whispered, "Maybe we should keep going."

No one disagreed.

The engine roared back to life, but the sound felt small against the vast hush of the mountains. As we drove on, the mist thinned slightly, revealing a line of prayer flags stretched between two rocks —tattered, colorless, flapping weakly in the cold wind. Beyond them lay a stretch of frozen ground leading upward toward a ridge.

"The pass," Diljeet said. "We're almost there."

But as the jeep climbed the final slope, I glanced back one last time. The fog below was shifting again, swirling in slow circles. For

a moment, I could have sworn I saw faces in it—faint, hollow-eyed, watching us climb.

The air grew colder still, biting through our clothes. Even the engine's warmth did nothing to fight it off. And when we finally reached the crest and looked down into the valley beyond, a silence unlike any other fell upon us.

Kailash Valley stretched before us—vast, white, and utterly still. Not a bird, not a sound. Only the whisper of wind weaving through the peaks. We thought that it looked like a cemetery where there is no noise.

The journey had taken us beyond the map, beyond laughter, beyond warmth and beyond our imagination.

And as the jeep rolled slowly into the valley of shadows, we all felt it—the mountains remembering us.

The Village at the Edge of Memory

By the time we rolled into Mastuj, the sun was already halfway to setting, spilling molten gold across the rooftops and painting the sky in fading streaks of crimson and orange. The village sat quietly between the shoulders of the mountains, cradled in their ancient arms. Wooden houses leaned slightly with age, their slanted roofs dusted with frost, as though they had grown straight from the earth and belonged more to the mountains than to men. Thin columns of smoke curled lazily from chimneys, drifting upward to mingle with the crisp evening air, carrying with them the smells of lentils, onions sizzling in ghee, and the unmistakable warmth of fresh bread being baked in clay ovens.

Children paused mid-game as our jeep rumbled past on the narrow dirt road, the sound of its engine echoing harshly against the stillness of the valley. Some waved with the innocent excitement of youth, their faces breaking into smiles as bright as the dying sun. Others stood perfectly still, staring with wide, unblinking eyes, as if strangers were rare here—rare enough to be remembered for years, perhaps even whispered about long after we were gone. The deeper we drove into the village, the quieter it seemed to grow, until the only sounds were the grinding of Bholi's engine and the low rustle of wind against the wooden shutters.

We parked near a modest teahouse at the center of the village. Its sign, hand-painted in Urdu, hung a little crookedly from the wooden awning, the paint faded but the letters still full of charm. The building itself leaned gently to one side, as though weary from carrying the stories of generations, but it glowed with a welcoming amber light from within.

The moment we stepped inside, warmth wrapped around us like a blanket. Steam rose from dented metal kettles set upon blackened stoves, the air rich with the mingling scents of cardamom chai, slow-cooked mutton curry, and the faint sweetness of freshly baked roti. The chatter of villagers filled the room, quiet and subdued, like voices careful not to disturb something listening from beyond the walls.

A man in his late fifties came forward to greet us. He was tall but slightly stooped, his beard peppered with gray, a neatly tied pakol perched upon his head. His smile was warm, but his eyes—

sharp and probing—lingered longer than politeness required.

"Travelers?" he asked in accented Urdu, his voice low yet clear.

"Yes," Diljeet replied, returning the smile. "We're heading toward Kailash."

At the sound of that name, the man's expression flickered. It was so quick one might have missed it—the brief falter of his smile, a shadow passing over his features. But we noticed. He recovered almost instantly, inclining his head as though nothing had passed. His hand swept toward an empty wooden table near the corner.

"You should rest," he said evenly. "The road ahead is... long."

We sat, grateful for the relief of solid chairs after hours in the cramped jeep. Soon, steaming cups of chai arrived, their rims chipped but their contents fragrant and strong. A short while later, clay bowls of shorba were placed before us, the broth still bubbling, rich with spices and tender cuts of mutton that fell apart at the touch of a spoon.

Around us, the locals continued their hushed conversations, though more than once I caught a pair of eyes flicking toward our table. The glances weren't hostile—just careful, wary, like people weighing whether or not to say aloud the thought resting on their tongues. The air in the room felt heavier with every passing moment, thickened not by the steam from the kettles but by something unspoken, something we had carried with us the moment we mentioned Kailash.

Peter leaned in close, his whisper breaking through the hush. "They're talking about us."

Amit gave a shrug, tearing a piece of roti with unnecessary force. "We are the most interesting thing to happen here today."

But I wasn't so sure. The laughter that usually followed Amit's remarks never came. My spoon hovered over the shorba, the rich smell of coriander and meat almost drowned out by the tension pressing against my chest. It wasn't us they were truly watching—it was the word we had spoken, the word that seemed to darken the teahouse walls: *Kailash*.

The man in the pakol returned after a time, balancing another dented pot of tea. He set it down gently in the center of our table. For a moment, his eyes lingered on mine, his gaze steady and unreadable. Then, in a voice so quiet it was nearly drowned by the hiss of the kettles, he spoke.

"The mountains... remember who comes to them."

The words hung in the air like smoke.

I opened my mouth to ask what he meant, but he had already turned, his shoulders hunched as though the sentence itself had cost him something. He walked back toward the counter, never once glancing over his shoulder.

We sat in silence, the warmth of the tea doing little to drive away the chill that crept into my bones. Outside, the last light was draining from the peaks, painting the snow a deep bruised purple before surrendering to the shadows of night. The valley was already sinking into darkness, the outlines of the houses blurred by blue mist.

We would stay here for the night, safe within Mastuj's fragile cocoon of warmth and firelight. But even as I sat there, surrounded by friends and strangers alike, I felt something else waiting—beyond the mountains, beyond the narrow passes. The road ahead was calling, long and narrow, and full of things we were not yet meant to see.

Later that evening, after the teahouse had emptied and only the dying glow of lanterns remained, the owner offered us rooms upstairs—simple spaces with low ceilings, thin mattresses, and wooden shutters that creaked softly in the wind. We accepted gratefully. Yet, as I climbed the narrow staircase, I felt an odd weight in the air, as though the walls themselves were listening.

From my room, I could see the dark shapes of the mountains framed against the faint starlight. A single lantern flickered in the distance, perhaps from a shepherd's hut or a shrine lost to time. The wind whispered against the wooden beams, low and steady, almost like breath.

Down the hallway, someone murmured in sleep. Or at least, I hoped it was sleep.

I lay awake long after the others had drifted off, my thoughts circling the words the old man had spoken. *The mountains remember who comes to them.* Was it a warning? A superstition? Or something else—something rooted in the soil and stone of this place?

At some point, I heard soft footsteps outside my door. Slow. Careful. The boards creaked beneath the weight, moving past, then stopping. For a long minute, there was nothing but silence and the faint hiss of wind. Then, a whisper—barely audible. My name.

I froze.

The sound came again, a little clearer this time. My name,

spoken in a voice that was both familiar and wrong—like someone I knew trying to imitate themselves.

I sat up, heart pounding. The footsteps resumed, fading down the hall toward the stairwell.

When I finally dared to open the door, the corridor was empty. Only a lantern burned faintly near the top of the stairs, its flame flickering as though disturbed by a recent draft.

I shut the door quietly, my hands trembling. Sleep, when it finally came, was thin and restless, filled with dreams of whispering peaks and distant eyes glinting in the snow.

When dawn arrived, pale and cold, the village was already awake. Smoke rose from chimneys once more, and the smell of chai drifted through the air. Yet there was something different in the faces of the villagers as they passed by—something almost sorrowful, as though they knew we would not return the same.

We ate breakfast in silence. Even Amit, usually the loudest among us, seemed subdued. The teahouse owner approached again, his expression unreadable. He placed a small pouch on the table—salt and dried herbs, tied with a red thread.

“For protection,” he said simply.

Before we could thank him, he had turned away, retreating behind the counter as though reluctant to linger near us.

Outside, the morning air bit at our faces, sharp with frost. The sky was pale and bruised with lingering mist. As we packed our things and loaded the jeep, I looked once more toward the distant road curling into the north.

Somewhere beyond those peaks lay Kailash—the place that had drawn us here, the place the mountains themselves seemed to whisper about.

And as we started the engine and the village began to recede behind us, I caught sight of the old man standing in the doorway of his teahouse, his figure framed by the dim light within. He wasn’t waving. He was watching.

Just watching.

As if to make sure the mountains didn’t forget us too soon.

The Boy Who Ran from the Bones

The villagers began to drift away one by one, their faces drawn tight with fear, their steps quick and silent as they vanished into the narrow lanes between the houses. Only the old man remained by the fire, the orange glow licking at the deep lines of his face. His eyes, once so full of the calm wisdom of mountain life, now seemed clouded by something darker—an old, remembered dread. He muttered a prayer under his breath, the words too low for me to catch, and then turned his gaze toward the black horizon where the three men with lanterns had gone. The lights were gone now. Swallowed whole by the night.

The boy sat near the embers, still shaking. Someone had wrapped a wool shawl around his small shoulders, but it did little to stop the trembling. His eyes darted now and then toward the edge of the square, as if expecting that thing—the walking skeleton—to return for him. I wanted to tell him he was safe, that there was nothing there, but the words died before they reached my lips. I wasn't sure I believed them myself.

The wind had changed. It blew from the direction of the mountains now, sharp and hollow, carrying with it a sound that didn't belong—a faint rattling, like dry sticks being dragged across stone. My skin prickled. Every instinct screamed to move, to get away from the open, but none of us dared to speak. The villagers were listening too. The fire had shrunk to a low glow, its warmth barely touching our faces. In that moment, the whole village seemed to hold its breath.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, the sound vanished. Only the sigh of the wind remained.

The old man stood, leaning heavily on his cane. "It is not good to stay out now," he said softly, his eyes on the dark. "The mountain spirits walk when the moon hides. Go inside. Pray if you must." He looked directly at me as he said it, and for an instant, his eyes glimmered—not with fear, but with something like pity.

We obeyed.

The path back to our hut felt longer than it had hours ago. The cold had deepened, biting through our clothes, seeping into our bones. The village was silent except for the occasional groan of wood as the wind pressed against the old houses. Lamps flickered

dimly through cracks in shutters, each a lonely beacon in the darkness. No dogs barked. No voices called. Even the mountains seemed to watch, vast and patient, their peaks lost in cloud.

When we reached the hut, the teahouse owner was waiting outside, his lantern casting a trembling halo of light. His expression was grave. “Stay inside,” he warned quietly. “Lock the door. No matter what you hear tonight, don’t open it.”

Diljeet tried to ask what he meant, but the man only shook his head and walked away, his footsteps fading fast.

We entered quickly and bolted the wooden door behind us. Inside, the air was colder than I remembered, and the single lantern we carried did little to push back the shadows that clung to the corners. The smell of damp earth was stronger now, mixed with something faintly metallic—like rust, or blood. No one spoke for a while. The fire from the courtyard seemed a world away.

Amit finally broke the silence. “You all saw how scared they were. What do you think it was?”

“An old superstition,” Diljeet muttered, rubbing his hands together for warmth. But his voice lacked conviction. “People here live surrounded by mountains and silence. They imagine things.”

Peter gave a weak laugh. “Yeah, like skeletons taking a stroll in the moonlight.” But the sound of his laugh was thin, brittle. Even he didn’t find it funny.

I sat near the wall, listening. The wind had picked up again, scraping against the roof, making the straw-packed seams whistle faintly. I tried to focus on its rhythm, to find some pattern in the noise, but every now and then it would shift, just slightly—too human, too deliberate. Once, I could’ve sworn I heard a slow, dragging sound outside, like something moving across the stones.

My heart hammered. “Did anyone else hear that?” I whispered.

The others looked at me, then at the door. No one answered. Amit reached for the lantern and turned the wick higher. Its light brightened for a moment, casting tall, trembling shadows across the mud walls.

We sat that way for what felt like hours—five grown men, huddled together in a hut built for shepherds, each pretending not to hear the sounds beyond the door. Sometimes the wind would fall completely still, and in that silence, the night would stretch thin, as though something pressed against it from the other side.

At some point, Peter got up and began pacing. “This is

ridiculous," he said under his breath. "We're sitting here like—like we're scared of the dark."

But even as he said it, his eyes flicked toward the window—an opening no bigger than his hand, covered with an old cloth that moved faintly with the wind. For a moment, the cloth lifted just enough to let in a sliver of moonlight. Something outside seemed to shift. A fleeting, pale motion—gone before I could name it.

"Sit down," I whispered.

Peter froze. His face had gone pale. Slowly, he sank back to the floor beside me.

The wind moaned again, long and low, curling through the cracks like a whisper. I closed my eyes, trying to steady my breath. But even with my eyes shut, I could feel it—the sense that something unseen stood just beyond the wall, listening. Not close enough to touch, not far enough to forget.

Time lost its meaning. The lantern burned low, its flame shrinking into a trembling blue tongue. Shadows thickened, pressing in. Somewhere in the distance, a dog began to howl—a thin, mournful sound that rose and fell like a plea. It was joined by another, then another, until the whole valley seemed to wail in chorus. The noise grew until it felt like the air itself was vibrating.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it stopped. The silence that followed was worse. Heavy. Expectant.

A faint knock came at the door.

Once. Twice. Slow. deliberate.

We froze. My pulse thudded in my ears. Amit's eyes met mine, wide, terrified. Peter swallowed hard. No one moved. The knock came again—three times now, softer, almost hesitant.

"Maybe it's the men who went out," Diljeet whispered. His words trembled.

"No," I said quietly. "They'd call out first."

For a long moment, we just sat there, waiting. The knock didn't come again. But after it stopped, I thought I heard something else—faint, rhythmic, just beyond the door. The sound of breathing. Not ours.

We waited, barely daring to breathe. Minutes dragged into an eternity. Finally, Diljeet reached for the lantern, shielding the flame with his hand as if afraid it might reveal us. "Whatever it is," he whispered, "it'll go away."

But the night didn't let go easily. The wind scraped the walls,

and once more that faint, rattling sound—like bone against stone—drifted through the cracks. It came and went, sometimes near, sometimes far. By the time it faded completely, my limbs had gone numb from tension.

At last, exhaustion claimed us. We didn't truly sleep; we simply drifted in and out of a shallow stupor, our minds hovering between wakefulness and dream. Every creak of the roof, every sigh of the wind pulled me back, heart pounding, eyes wide in the dark.

When I finally dared to open the door at dawn, the world outside was washed in gray mist. The fire pit in the square was cold, the ashes scattered. The villagers moved about quietly, their faces pale, their eyes red-rimmed from a sleepless night. Of the three men who had gone toward the black rock, there was no sign.

Only the old man stood by the edge of the square, staring into the fog. When he turned toward me, his expression said everything I didn't want to know.

Something had followed us to Mastuj.

And whatever it was—it had not come to rest.

The Hill of the Restless Dead

The very next day, all five of us resolved to climb to the hilltop—the same cursed ground where the terrified boy had claimed to see the walking dead. The villagers whispered it was a burial place, a land where the soil had never rested, where the dead refused to remain buried. Even as we prepared ourselves, a weight pressed down on us, as if the mountains themselves disapproved of our plan.

We carried recording devices, small and trembling in our hands, their blinking red lights a fragile promise that we might at least capture evidence of what lurked beyond mortal understanding. But in truth, no one trusted the machines. Taking EMF or EVP readings seemed pointless here—this place already radiated death, the kind that seeped into your lungs and clung to your skin. The air itself felt like it had been exhaled by graves. Instead of relying on instruments, we steeled ourselves for a confrontation, grim and inevitable.

From the village, we convinced four tall, broad-shouldered young men to join us. Their faces were taut, their courage masking a fear that flickered in their eyes. Each carried crude weapons—spears fashioned from sharpened wood, axes forged in village fires, blades chipped from stone. Their knuckles were white around their grips, yet their silence said more than words ever could. They knew what we were walking toward, and still, they came.

Diljeet and I carried our guns, though deep in my heart, I knew no bullet could kill what was already dead. Amit, Peter, and Abdul armed themselves with jagged stones—primitive, desperate, but better than bare hands. Somewhere inside, we all shared the same thought: no weapon forged by man would matter here. And yet, we clung to the faint hope of one plan. If we could capture one of these skeletal abominations—bind it, douse it, burn it—perhaps the fire would free its spirit, allowing it to vanish into eternity. It was a plan born more of desperation than belief, but it was all we had.

The climb was long, each step dragging us further into a silence too complete, too unnatural. Even the wind seemed to have abandoned the hill. No birds circled overhead. No insects stirred. It was as if the land itself was holding its breath, waiting for us to trespass.

At last, we reached the graveyard. The place was hidden beneath a veil of mist, the stones jutting from the earth like rotten teeth. We crouched behind a massive boulder, its surface cold and damp, and dared to peer out. What we saw rooted us to the ground, our blood pounding in our ears.

Eight—perhaps ten—human skeletons wandered the burial ground. Their bones clattered faintly, joints creaking with every unnatural step, as if their bodies had never forgotten the weight of movement. They did not shuffle mindlessly; they moved with purpose, like sentries keeping eternal watch. Their empty sockets swept across the land, pausing as though they could sense intruders hidden just beyond sight. The air seemed to vibrate with their presence, thick with the whisper of decay.

We crouched lower, every muscle locked, recording their every move. I could hear my own heartbeat thudding like a drum. For several long minutes, we remained unseen, shadows among shadows. Then disaster struck.

Abdul shifted his weight, and beneath his boot, something cracked. A dry fruit—small, brittle, insignificant—yet in that suffocating silence, it sounded like a thunderclap.

One skeleton stopped. Its skull twisted in a jerking, inhuman motion, the vertebrae cracking as it turned toward us. Empty sockets stared, unblinking, unending. Its body stiffened, then began to move, step by deliberate step, closing the distance between us.

Panic surged. Amit, acting faster than thought, hurled a rope, the loop snaring around the thing's ribcage. He yanked, dragging it forward with a force born of sheer terror. Peter fumbled with the can of petrol, splashing it across the skeleton's bones, the liquid running down its bony frame. I struck my lighter—its tiny flame flared—and hurled it against the creature.

In an instant, fire consumed it. Flames licked up its body, devouring the bones in a blaze that should have reduced it to ash. For a heartbeat, triumph flickered in my chest. Then the scream came.

The sound was no sound of this world. High-pitched, hollow, endless—it clawed at our ears, at our minds, at the fragile walls of our sanity. It was the cry of the grave, the wail of something that had been denied peace for far too long. It split the air, carrying across the graveyard like a death knell.

The other skeletons stopped. Slowly, in perfect unison, they

turned toward us. Their heads twisted, their jaws opening in silent mockery of speech. And then, as one, they began to advance.

They did not run. They did not stumble. They moved with dreadful, deliberate rhythm—unyielding, unstoppable, like soldiers marching to a war that never ended.

The villagers with us raised their weapons, loosing arrows and swinging blades at the burning skeleton. Sparks flew as wood struck bone, but it did not falter. It burned and shrieked, yet still it lurched forward, flames clinging to it like a second skin. No weapon, no fire, no fury seemed enough.

The ground beneath us felt suddenly smaller, the hilltop closing in. Behind us lay a steep descent—narrow, treacherous, impossible in panic. In front of us, the dead advanced, their steps echoing like drums of doom.

We were trapped.

Then chaos erupted.

One of the villagers lunged with his spear, driving the point clean through a skeleton's ribcage. The weapon stuck, useless, and the creature wrenched it free as though plucking a thorn. Another man swung an axe, cleaving through an arm that fell, clattering, to the dirt—only for the severed limb to twitch and crawl back toward its master. The air filled with the crack of gunfire as Diljeet and I opened fire. Bullets tore through skulls, shattering bone, but each fragment twitched, reassembling as if bound by invisible sinew.

"Back!" I shouted. "Form a line—don't let them circle us!"

But they were already upon us.

A blur of motion—a bony hand lashed out, its claws grazing my cheek. I stumbled, the ground spinning beneath me. Peter caught my arm, dragging me upright just as another skeleton lunged from the mist. Its jaw opened wide, a hollow hiss pouring from within. Peter smashed his rock against its skull; the bone cracked, but the creature did not stop. Its empty sockets glowed faintly—blue, cold, otherworldly.

"Petrol! More petrol!" Amit yelled, fumbling for another can.

Abdul snatched it, flinging the liquid in a desperate arc. Flames roared once more, spreading faster this time, consuming two of the creatures in a whirl of smoke and sparks. The firelight painted the mist in wild orange strokes, shadows leaping like living things. Yet even as they burned, the dead marched forward.

Their advance was silent now—eerily calm, almost ritualistic.

The mist thickened, swallowing the hilltop in a pale shroud. Within it, we saw shifting shapes, skeletal outlines swaying as though in a macabre dance. For every one that fell, another seemed to rise, clawing its way out of the soil with the brittle sound of cracking coffins.

"Fall back!" Diljeet barked. "To the ridge—move!"

We ran. The ground trembled beneath our boots, the earth itself seeming to groan. Behind us, the flames spread, devouring the grass, licking at the tombstones. The fire should have felt like safety, but it only made the shadows darker. I looked back once—and froze.

One skeleton stood apart from the rest. Taller, broader, its skull crowned with shards of rusted metal, as if remnants of an ancient helmet. It raised a bony hand, and the others stopped instantly. The leader's jaw shifted, the faintest whisper escaping, a rasping chant that made the hair rise on my neck.

The air turned cold—bitterly, unnaturally cold. Our breath came out in clouds of white. Frost formed on the rocks. The fire dimmed, shrinking as if afraid. And then, with one sweeping motion of its arm, the leader pointed straight at us.

A thunderous crack split the night. The ground beneath us shuddered. From the earth burst more skeletal hands—grasping, reaching, dragging themselves upward in grotesque resurrection.

"Run!" I yelled, but my voice was swallowed by the wind that had suddenly returned, howling through the valley like a chorus of lost souls.

We stumbled down the slope, tripping over roots and stones, our torches flickering wildly. The villagers fled beside us, their weapons forgotten, eyes wide with terror. Behind us came the clatter of bone against stone—the relentless pursuit of the damned.

I glanced back again and saw them—dozens now—silhouetted in the firelight, their burning forms descending the hill like a tide of death. One fell, shattering against a rock, but the fragments crawled forward, each piece alive, moving with unholy determination.

Amit slipped, his foot catching on a root. I grabbed him, hauling him upright just as a flaming skeleton lunged from the darkness. Diljeet fired—once, twice—the shots echoing across the valley. The creature exploded into fragments that scattered like glass shards. But we didn't stop. We couldn't.

The mist closed around us, thick as smoke. The path ahead was

barely visible, lit only by the dying flicker of our torches. I could hear my heartbeat, my breath, the crunch of gravel beneath our boots—and beneath it all, the faint, rhythmic tapping of bone on stone, growing louder, closer.

At the base of the hill, the path split in two. For a moment we hesitated. That instant nearly cost us. A skeletal figure burst from the fog, its flaming skull inches from Peter's face. He swung the torch, striking it hard. The creature reeled back, the fire flaring brighter as its jaw fell open in another hollow scream.

We broke left, sprinting toward the narrow gorge that led to the river below. The slope grew steeper, the air thicker, and my lungs burned with every breath. Behind us, the burning hill was alive with motion—figures swarming, shadows dancing, fire spreading like a living curse.

At last, the ground leveled out near the base of the mountain. We stumbled to a halt, gasping, drenched in sweat and fear. The mist thinned slightly, revealing the faint shimmer of water ahead. For a moment, it seemed we'd made it.

Then, from far above, came a sound that froze our blood—a single, hollow drumbeat, echoing from the hilltop.

We turned as one.

Through the drifting smoke, the tall skeleton stood at the crest of the hill, wreathed in flames, unmoving. Its hollow eyes blazed like twin lanterns of the underworld. It raised its arm once more, and though no voice emerged, we heard the message in our minds, clear and cold as steel:

You are marked.

The wind roared, scattering ash and sparks into the night. We stumbled backward, the river's edge at our heels. For a heartbeat, no one spoke. Then Diljeet whispered, "This isn't over."

And I knew he was right.

Because death wasn't chasing us anymore.

It was waiting.

Lost in the Blood-Black Depths

Death was closing in—its skeletal footsteps pounding the earth like the drums of war, its hollow sockets glowing with a hunger no flame could quench, no prayer could silence.

And then—Peter moved.

Whether it was brilliance or madness, I will never know. In one savage motion, he tore out the bundle of quick fire-catching wood he always carried. His hands trembled, his breath ragged, but his lighter sparked, and in an instant the night detonated into fire. Flames howled upward, wild and furious, tearing through the darkness like unleashed beasts, their roar ripping the silence to shreds.

"Hold hands! NOW!" Peter's command ripped through the chaos, a blade of raw authority.

Abdul staggered back, choking on fear. "What are you doing?" His voice cracked, his wide eyes darting between the wall of fire and the advancing dead.

"Trust me!" Peter roared, the sound carrying the weight of desperation and defiance. "Don't let go—no matter what happens!"

There was no hesitation. Our hands locked together, an unbreakable chain forged in terror. The flames towered higher, shadows leaping like writhing demons across the gravestones, the smoke swelling thick and choking. It rolled over us, swallowing the burial ground in suffocating darkness. The skeletons vanished into it, their clattering steps muffled, their ghastly frames blurred into the storm of ash and fire.

"I can't see!" Amit's scream sliced through the haze, ragged with panic.

"Run!" Diljeet barked, his voice tight, urgent. "Don't stop—keep moving forward!"

We hurled ourselves into the smoldering fog, hacking, stumbling, our lungs seared with the acrid poison of burning wood and bone. The earth beneath us was uneven, jagged—alive, almost—as if the mountain itself sought to tear us down. Our grip was everything, our only tether to sanity, the sole thread keeping us from scattering into the choking void.

"I think we lost them—" Abdul gasped, but his words fractured into a scream.

The ground shattered beneath his feet with a thunderous crack. The chain snapped taut, ripping us forward toward a black, yawning abyss.

"Hold on!" I shrieked, my voice shredding into the smoke. My arms burned with the strain as I fought to hold the line.

But it was useless.

The mountain betrayed us. The soil disintegrated beneath, collapsing in an avalanche of stone and dust. Our hands were wrenched apart one by one—Abdul first, his cry vanishing into the void. Then Amit, his desperate shout—"Peter!"—echoing as he was swallowed whole.

"Don't let—" My words died on my tongue as the ground ripped from beneath me, and I plunged headlong into the abyss.

The world dissolved into a maelstrom of sound—the roar of crumbling earth, the rush of wind clawing at my skin, the merciless thunder of my heart. Above me, the graveyard disappeared into shadow; below, nothing but a vast, endless black.

And then it struck me, colder than the grave, heavier than despair.

We were not simply falling.

We were being dragged—pulled by an unseen force, into something waiting deep below. Something ancient. Something ravenous. Something far, far worse than death.

The fall felt endless, a descent through a world of smoke and echoing screams. My mind spun, caught between terror and disbelief. Shapes moved in the dark beside me—Amit's flailing arms, Peter's silhouette twisting through the air, the flash of Abdul's pendant glinting faintly before being swallowed by shadow.

And through it all came a sound—not wind, not rock—but a low, guttural moan, vibrating through the chasm, deep as the mountains themselves. It wasn't one voice. It was thousands, layered and broken, a chorus of pain and fury that made my blood turn to ice.

Then the fall ended.

We hit water—or something that felt like it. The impact knocked the breath from my lungs. I sank, weightless, disoriented. The liquid was thick and cold, clinging to my clothes like oil, filling my nose with a stench that could only be decay. My arms flailed until my head broke the surface, gasping for air that reeked of sulfur and rot.

Dim light flickered above—no, below. Everything was upside

down. The world seemed twisted, warped, as if the laws of nature had fractured. The water glowed faintly with a sickly green hue, casting ghostly ripples across what appeared to be... bones. Thousands of them, piled high beneath the surface, stretching into infinity.

"Peter!" I shouted hoarsely. "Amit! Abdul! Diljeet!"

No response. Only the echo of my own voice, swallowed by the cavernous dark.

Then, faintly, I heard coughing—ragged, desperate. A shadow moved nearby. I swam toward it, my limbs numb. Peter emerged from the murk, his face pale, his eyes wide with disbelief. He reached for me, and for a moment, I thought I saw relief in his gaze.

"Where—where are we?" he stammered, his voice trembling.

Before I could answer, the water stirred again. A ripple. Then another. The surface broke—not from above, but from beneath.

Skeletal hands.

They rose from the depths, pale and glistening, clutching at our legs with cold, relentless fingers. The bones were slick with black residue, each hand moving with eerie precision. One wrapped around Peter's ankle. He screamed, kicking wildly. Another caught my arm, its grip strong enough to bruise.

"Swim! Get out—get out!" I gasped, struggling against the pull. The more we fought, the more hands appeared—dozens, then hundreds—emerging from the corpse-water, dragging us down with monstrous strength.

I struck at them, but my fists met only bone. Peter managed to tear one hand free, only for three more to latch onto his shoulders. He vanished beneath the surface with a strangled cry, bubbles rising in his wake.

"Peter!"

The name tore from my throat, but the dark swallowed it whole. Something coiled around my neck—a skeletal arm, jointed and alive. It pulled me downward into the depths where the light died, and the water thickened into something that wasn't water anymore.

Down there, I saw them.

Hundreds of bodies suspended in the gloom—faces twisted in agony, eyes wide open though long dead. The skeletons that had walked the graveyard above were nothing compared to what lurked here. These were ancient, fused into the cavern walls, their bones stretched and melded into grotesque formations, like the mountain

itself had devoured them and refused to let go.

The moaning rose again, louder, surrounding me. From the walls, from the water, from the hollow skulls that lined the chasm. Words began to take shape within the noise—a language older than breath, older than man.

Something was speaking.

And I realized with growing horror—it wasn't calling for help. It was calling us.

A violent current seized me, dragging me sideways through a tunnel of bones. My vision blurred. The pressure crushed my chest. I couldn't tell if I was screaming or just thinking I was.

Then, suddenly, I was thrown out—spat into a wide cavern, gasping, shivering. I landed hard on slick stone, coughing out the foul liquid. Around me, others began to appear—Amit, drenched and trembling; Diljeet, clutching his gun uselessly; Abdul, blood trickling from his temple.

Peter wasn't there.

The silence that followed was unbearable. Only the steady drip of water echoed through the cavern. The air shimmered faintly with the same unnatural green light, seeping through cracks in the walls.

Diljeet rose slowly, his face ghost-white. "This... this isn't the mountain," he whispered. "We're under it."

I nodded numbly, my voice gone. The walls seemed to pulse, like the inside of something alive. Faint, shifting shapes moved within the rock—skeletal outlines, flickering in and out of sight.

Then we heard it again. Footsteps.

They came from every direction—measured, deliberate, echoing off the stone. The same sound that had haunted us on the hilltop, only louder now, heavier, amplified by the cavern's hollow heart.

The green light brightened, and the surface of the far wall began to split—cracks forming in slow, deliberate lines. Dust rained from above as the stone peeled open like flesh.

From within stepped a single figure.

Its bones gleamed with a faint metallic sheen, ancient armor fused into its form. Its skull bore the same rusted crown I had seen before, only now its eye sockets burned with a fierce, unholy fire.

The leader.

Its gaze fixed upon us. No sound came from its mouth, but we heard the voice clearly—in our minds, our chests, our very blood.

"You trespassed upon the forgotten ground," it said. "Now, you

will never leave it."

Amit stumbled backward, shaking his head. "No... no more," he whispered. "We didn't mean—"

The creature raised its hand. The air thickened instantly, pressing against our chests like a vice. My vision darkened at the edges. The walls around us began to tremble, dust falling in a steady rain.

Then, all at once, the floor cracked open again, revealing another pit below—deeper, darker, endless.

The thing stepped aside, its hollow face unreadable. "Fall," the voice whispered. "Fall into what you awakened."

And the ground obeyed.

The stone gave way beneath us in a single, violent motion. We dropped, screaming, the world turning into chaos once more. The last thing I saw was the skeletal king's burning eyes staring down from above—watching, waiting—as we fell into the dark.

The air grew colder still. The green light faded to black. And somewhere below, something vast and ancient stirred, as if sensing our arrival.

It was not done with us.

It had only just begun to wake.

The Fall Into Darkness

The air grew heavier as minutes passed, the chamber's stillness deepening until even the faint hum of the fridge began to sound unnatural—too rhythmic, too steady, as though it pulsed with a heartbeat not its own. The glow from the runes shimmered faintly across the walls, throwing long, twisted shadows that danced like restless spirits in the flickering light.

Peter sat apart from us, his face half-hidden in the gloom. He had not spoken since we awoke. His eyes were fixed on the ringing phone as if it held the power to unravel the madness around us. The shrill sound came again, cutting through the silence like a knife, echoing in waves that made the stone itself seem to vibrate.

"Don't answer it," Diljeet said firmly. His tone carried the brittle authority of fear barely contained.

Peter didn't respond. The phone's glow painted his face pale blue, his hand trembling just inches above it.

"Peter," I warned, my throat dry, "don't."

But curiosity—the same human weakness that had led explorers into cursed tombs and sailors toward phantom shores—won its battle. Peter snatched up the receiver.

The sound stopped instantly.

For a heartbeat, there was nothing but silence—so profound it felt like the world itself had drawn breath. Then came a voice, faint and distant, like wind whispering through bones.

"Go back..." it said. The words cracked with static, breaking apart like dry twigs. "Go back... before it wakes."

Peter's face drained of color. He tried to speak, but only a rasp escaped his throat. "Who is this?"

The voice came again, distorted, deeper this time. "You are not supposed to be here."

A shriek of static tore through the chamber, loud enough to make us flinch. Peter dropped the phone. The line went dead.

The television flickered to life on its own. Its screen flared white, then bled into grey, showing an image that froze us in place.

Ourselves.

We were there—five figures standing inside the same stone chamber, just as we were now. But the figures on the screen moved differently, their gestures jerky, their faces pale and hollow-eyed.

Behind them, in the depths of the image, something shifted. A shadow, tall and misshapen, loomed just beyond the reach of light.

Abdul stumbled back, knocking over a can. “Turn it off,” he hissed. “Turn it off!”

I lunged for the plug, yanking it from the socket. But the screen stayed on, the image flickering faster, the shadows crawling closer behind our mirrored selves. The static deepened, now more like breathing—wet, heavy, labored.

The runes on the wall flared suddenly, their golden light brightening into a harsh, searing glow. The carved letters pulsed like living veins, each symbol beating in rhythm with that awful sound. The chamber shook faintly, dust sifting down from the ceiling.

“Back away from the walls,” I shouted. My voice sounded foreign, ragged in my ears.

We stumbled toward the center of the chamber. The television went dark as abruptly as it had come to life, leaving only the runes glowing faintly, the pulse slowing until it became still once more.

Peter was shaking. His voice came out hollow. “It said ‘before it wakes.’ What does that mean?”

I stared at the carvings, the lines of ancient script that seemed to twist when I tried to read them. “Maybe it means this place isn’t empty,” I said quietly. “Maybe something sleeps here.”

The silence that followed was suffocating. Even the air felt wrong—thick, metallic, humming faintly in our ears.

Hours might have passed, or minutes; time had lost its rhythm. We lit a small fire from the wood stacked neatly near the wall, its warmth offering little comfort. Shadows gathered at the edges of the light, pressing inward like watchful sentinels.

Amit began pacing, muttering to himself, his nerves fraying under the weight of the unknown. “We need to find a way out. There must be a tunnel, a door—something.”

“There is no door,” Diljeet said grimly. “Only the way we fell from. And it’s sealed.”

The word hung in the air—sealed. A finality we could taste.

But then, a faint sound broke through—the hum of the fridge stuttering, faltering, then clicking off. The power flickered. The glow from the runes dimmed, the temperature dropping sharply. Our breaths turned to mist.

Then, from somewhere deep within the walls, came a low,

resonant groan. Stone grinding against stone. The sound of something shifting. Something vast.

The runes reignited—but now their color was no longer gold. It was red, deep and pulsating, casting the chamber in a sickly crimson haze. The symbols had changed, rearranged themselves into new patterns that crawled across the walls like living serpents.

A fissure split open along the far side of the chamber, releasing a gust of cold air that smelled of decay and ancient dust. From within it came a sound—a slow, deliberate scraping, like claws dragging across stone.

Abdul screamed, backing away. “It’s coming from inside the wall!”

We stumbled toward the fire, instinctively drawing close together. The red glow intensified, painting our faces in bloodlight. The scraping grew louder, accompanied by a faint, rhythmic thud—like a heartbeat too large, too heavy to belong to anything human.

A piece of stone cracked loose from the wall and fell, revealing darkness behind it. A hollow void that seemed to breathe. Then, out of that darkness, a hand emerged—bone-white, elongated, the joints bending wrong.

Peter froze. His lips moved, whispering words that dissolved into nothing.

The thing that followed the hand was not a skeleton, not entirely. Its bones were wrapped in shreds of rotted flesh, its skull half-covered in what looked like decayed fabric, perhaps the remains of a burial shroud. It crawled free from the wall like something dragged out of a nightmare, its movements slow but purposeful, deliberate.

The glow of the runes flared violently, as though reacting to its presence. The creature hissed, recoiling from the light, but it did not retreat. Instead, it turned its hollow sockets toward us, its head jerking in unnatural angles.

“Stay behind the fire,” I said, my voice breaking, “don’t move.”

But Peter didn’t listen. He stepped forward, his eyes glassy, transfixed. “It’s not real,” he murmured. “It can’t be.”

The creature lunged.

Its motion was silent and swift, its body twisting through the air with terrifying grace. Peter screamed as its bony claws raked across his chest, sending him sprawling backward. Blood darkened his shirt instantly. The thing recoiled again as the firelight struck its

face, letting out a guttural sound that shook the air.

I grabbed a burning log and hurled it. The flames burst against the creature's shoulder, setting it alight. It shrieked, the sound inhuman, echoing off the walls until it seemed to come from everywhere at once. The red runes blazed brighter, forcing the creature back toward the fissure.

And then, as suddenly as it had appeared, it retreated—melting into the wall, vanishing into the stone as though it had never been.

Peter lay gasping, his breath shallow. We rushed to him, tearing fabric to bind the wound, but the blood kept seeping through, dark and thick. His skin had turned pale, almost translucent, his eyes unfocused.

"There's something in the wound," Diljeet whispered. "Look."

Tiny black veins were spreading from the gash, creeping up Peter's neck like ink seeping through paper. His body convulsed once, then went still.

For a long time, none of us moved. The only sound was the crackle of the fire and the faint hum returning from the fridge, as though the chamber itself had resumed its unnatural rhythm.

When I looked up, the runes on the wall had changed once more. The red had faded, replaced now by a cold blue glow. And written across the largest section of stone, in letters we could now read clearly, were words that hadn't been there before:

"The living are not welcome where memory does not die."

The air thickened again, pressing down on us like a weight. The television flickered back to life, its screen black this time, but faint shapes moved within it—figures shifting in the dark, whispering, waiting.

We drew closer to the fire, the only warmth left in that place, the only barrier between us and whatever had begun to wake beyond those walls.

The mountain groaned once more, deep and distant, as if it too remembered.

And so we sat in silence beneath the earth, surrounded by the hum of machines that should not exist, by runes that breathed like living things, and by the steady pulse of something vast, sleeping just beyond the stone.

We knew then that we had not survived the fall. We had only crossed a threshold—into a place that waited patiently for the living to forget what life truly meant.

The Whispering Walls

The light above felt unreal, almost sacred, as though we had emerged from one world into another. After hours—perhaps days—trapped beneath the mountain, the sun's brilliance was blinding. The air smelled of dust and pine sap, sharp and clean, carrying a chill that burned our lungs. We stood there in silence, each of us overwhelmed, blinking against the golden flood of daylight that washed across the graveyard's edge.

The village lay beyond the slope, still and distant, its small cluster of houses framed by the towering ridges of the Kailash mountains. The wind carried faint echoes—cowbells, the rustle of dry leaves, a dog's bark far away. Life sounded painfully normal again.

But beneath that fragile calm, an unease lingered.

The door we had come through was half-buried in stone, hidden among the crooked tombs and tilted gravestones that marked the ancient cemetery. From this side, it looked less like a passage and more like the mouth of the mountain itself—dark, secretive, unwilling to release what it had swallowed.

Peter leaned heavily against a cracked pillar, clutching the cloth-wrapped talisman Abdul had given him. His face was pale, streaked with dust and sweat. "It's over," he muttered, his voice trembling. "We're out. Thank God."

But I knew better. The Quranic verses we had recited still echoed faintly in my chest, their resonance alive, warning that protection did not mean peace.

"Not yet," I said quietly. "We need to move before sunset."

The others nodded. Our path lay clear: down the mountain's narrow trail toward the heart of the valley, where the Sufi baba lived.

The climb was rough. The path wound through ridges of broken stone and narrow passes carved by centuries of wind. The sun blazed mercilessly, yet the air remained icy. The mountain was alive with sounds—ravens calling from the cliffs, loose pebbles tumbling down steep faces, the occasional crack of melting ice.

Each step felt watched.

At one point, Abdul stopped suddenly, his eyes fixed on the ridge above us. "Did you hear that?" he whispered.

We all froze.

A sound drifted down from the rocks—faint, rhythmic, almost like footsteps following ours, too evenly spaced to be an animal. I strained to listen. The wind moaned through the ravine, carrying dust and whispers. The sound faded, replaced by the beating of our own hearts.

“Keep walking,” I said. “Don’t look back.”

It took nearly an hour before the terrain began to flatten. The path widened, opening into a meadow where wild grass swayed under the afternoon light. In its center stood a cluster of withered trees and a small stone shrine, half-collapsed and covered in moss. The air here was unnaturally still.

Diljeet stepped forward, his voice low. “This must be old burial ground. We should pass quickly.”

As we moved, a sudden gust tore through the clearing, whipping dust into our faces. The grass bent violently in one direction, as though pushed by unseen hands. The trees groaned, their branches creaking like old bones.

Then came the whisper—a soft, collective sigh that rippled through the meadow, a chorus of faint voices, impossible to locate.

Abdul clutched his amulet tight. “They’re here,” he breathed.

The golden cloth in his hand fluttered, and for an instant, the script of Ayat al-Kursi shimmered faintly under the sun, as if glowing from within.

I began to recite again, my voice rising over the wind:

“Allāhu Lā ilāha illā Huwa al-Hayyu al-Qayyūm...”

The sound steadied me. Each verse was an anchor, a thread binding us to faith amid the unseen storm. The whispers wavered, retreated like mist under the morning light. When the wind stilled again, the meadow was silent once more.

We walked faster. None of us spoke.

By late afternoon, the valley opened wide, revealing the path that led toward the Sufi baba’s hermitage—a solitary structure perched beside a crystal stream, surrounded by tall cedars. Smoke curled lazily from a chimney, the faint scent of burning sandalwood drifting through the air.

Hope stirred in our chests for the first time since the nightmare began.

As we approached, a figure appeared at the threshold—an old man in a white shawl, his beard long and silver, his eyes sharp as

the mountain wind. He stood motionless, watching us from afar, as though he had been expecting our arrival.

We stopped several paces away, hesitant. It was Abdul who spoke first, his voice cracking with exhaustion and reverence. “Hazrat... we seek your help. Something dark has awakened in the mountains.”

The Sufi baba did not answer. Instead, he lifted his hand slowly, palm outward, and murmured something too soft to hear. The wind stirred, carrying a faint scent of rosewater and incense. He gestured for us to enter.

Inside, the air was warm and dimly lit. Candles burned along the walls, their flames steady despite the mountain breeze. Ancient manuscripts lay open on a low wooden table, their ink fading with age. The room seemed timeless, a sanctuary carved out of the chaos of the world.

The baba studied us in silence, his gaze resting finally on the talismans we carried. “You have touched something that should never have been disturbed,” he said. His voice was deep, resonant, each word deliberate. “The earth remembers what it buries. And what was buried beneath those mountains was never meant to walk again.”

Peter’s voice trembled. “We saw them... skeletons—moving, chasing, attacking. Djinns inside them. They tried to kill us.”

The old man nodded, as if confirming what he already knew. “Those are not djinns of the air. They are from the realm of fire and dust—ancient ones, bound by black oaths. Someone among your villagers has awakened them.”

Abdul stepped closer. “We sealed the chamber with Qur’anic verses. The runes glowed... then dimmed. Does that mean they are gone?”

The baba’s eyes darkened. “No,” he said quietly. “You did not seal it. You only delayed it.”

A heavy silence fell. The fire in the corner cracked sharply, its sparks drifting like embers of warning.

The baba reached into a chest and drew out a small clay bowl etched with symbols older than any language we knew. From a pouch, he scattered black seeds into it, then poured oil over them. A faint hiss rose as he began to chant—low, melodic, powerful.

His words were not Arabic, nor any tongue we understood. Yet as he spoke, the air changed. The shadows along the walls began to

shift, their forms trembling.

He looked up suddenly, his eyes blazing. “One of you is marked,” he said.

We froze.

The baba’s gaze fell on Peter. The old man pointed, his hand trembling. “You,” he whispered. “You carry the scent of the grave.”

Peter recoiled, his face pale. “No—I... I didn’t do anything.”

The baba stepped forward, touching Peter’s forehead with two fingers. The moment his skin made contact, Peter gasped and staggered back. Black smoke coiled from beneath his shirt, twisting upward into the air like a serpent. The smell of burning flesh filled the room.

The baba began to recite, his voice rising with force. “Bismillāhi alladhī lā yaḍurru maʿa ismihi shay’un fi al-arḍi wa lā fi al-samā’...”

Peter’s scream tore through the chamber. The smoke writhed violently, forming the vague shape of a face—eyes hollow, mouth wide in silent rage—before it exploded into a burst of sparks and was gone.

Peter collapsed, breathing hard, tears streaking down his face. The baba wiped his hand over his forehead, whispering prayers beneath his breath.

“It is done,” he said softly. “The djinn has left him.”

We stood in stunned silence. The old man sank into his seat, exhaustion lining his features. “But the others are not gone. They are gathering. The mountain has become their gate.”

He handed me a vial of thick, amber liquid. “Anoint the talismans with this. It will strengthen the barrier. You must return before the next moonrise, or the seal will break completely.”

My chest tightened. “Return?”

He nodded gravely. “To the chamber. To where it began.”

The thought sent a chill down my spine, but I understood. Faith without courage was hollow. The verses we carried would protect us; the baba’s guidance would light the path.

Outside, dusk had fallen. The sky burned in shades of crimson and gold, the mountains etched like dark silhouettes against the dying light. We stood on the edge of the valley once more, the wind carrying the distant call to prayer from the village below.

We had escaped death, survived the wrath of the unseen—but our deliverance came with a price.

For in the silence that followed, I could still hear faint whispers

echoing from the direction of the graveyard. Not of menace this time, but of warning. The mountain was awake, and what slept within it had only just begun to stir.

And as the last light faded behind the peaks, we tightened our grip on the talismans and began the long walk back—toward the darkness we had once fled, and the reckoning that awaited us beneath the earth.

The Djinn Slayers' Victory

The next morning, we rose with the first light of dawn. The air was crisp and biting, laced with the faint scent of dew and ash. A soft golden haze stretched across the horizon, bathing the land in ghostly light. In the heart of the camp, fires crackled and sputtered, their smoke spiraling upward like prayers to the heavens. The men moved quietly, each lost in his thoughts, their faces pale but resolute. The aroma of freshly baked bread and spiced tea mingled with the earthy smell of damp soil—an anchor of normalcy before we stepped once more into the maw of the unknown.

Breakfast was simple yet sacred. No one spoke much. Each man ate as if the meal itself were a blessing to be cherished—warm bread torn by trembling fingers, roasted meat shared in silence, cups of steaming tea sipped with eyes downcast. Even laughter, which once came easily among us, felt too heavy to rise. Every clink of metal, every breath of wind carried the weight of what awaited beyond the hills—the Valley of the Dead.

Once ready, we gathered our weapons and recited a short prayer led by Abdul. The rhythmic cadence of his voice steadied us, a fragile shield of faith in the face of unspeakable terror.

"Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim," he began softly, his voice echoing against the mountainsides. "In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. May He protect us from the evils of the unseen."

When the last word faded, we set out.

The land stretched before us like a wound carved into the earth—barren, silent, haunted. The ground crunched beneath our boots, each step sinking slightly into the ashen soil. The sky hung low and gray, a pallid shroud that dulled even the light of the sun. There was no wind, no sound of birds, no life. Only the rhythmic beat of our footsteps and the occasional creak of leather straps broke the stillness.

After hours of marching, a sense of unease began to grow—an invisible pressure that clung to the air, thick and suffocating. I could feel it crawling up my spine, whispering warnings I dared not voice. Then, out of the drifting mist ahead, movement stirred.

Shapes began to take form—tall, thin, skeletal figures shuffling forward, their bones clattering faintly like beads struck in rhythm.

For a heartbeat, no one moved. Then realization struck.

"Positions!" I barked, drawing my weapon.

The skeletal beings advanced faster now, their hollow eye sockets burning with unnatural light. They moved with impossible coordination, like puppets bound by invisible strings. The mist thickened, swirling around them like a veil of ghosts.

The men quickly formed a defensive line. Their voices rose in trembling unison, reciting verses of protection:

"Allāhu Lā ilāha illā Huwa al-Hayyu al-Qayyūm..."

The words cut through the heavy air like fire through fog. The skeletons faltered for a moment, their jerky movements slowing, but then surged forward again with renewed ferocity.

"Strike them in the chest!" I roared. "Aim for the heart!"

The clash was immediate and brutal. Steel met bone with ringing precision. Our amulets—each bearing the inscribed words of Ayat al-Kursi—flared with faint golden light. The djinns' claws slashed through the air, shrieking as they struck an unseen barrier that held firm. Their blows passed harmlessly through us, their power broken by faith itself.

Our strikes, however, landed true. Every blade that met a ribcage sparked with divine fury. The djinns wailed, their skeletal shells collapsing in showers of dust. One after another, they fell—crumbling into piles of scorched ash. The valley echoed with their dying cries, a chorus of rage fading into silence.

In mere moments, twenty of them were gone.

Breathing heavily, we regrouped, scanning the horizon for movement. Only the mist remained, curling lazily over the broken bones scattered across the ground.

The path ahead was clear, but unease lingered. As I looked around at my men—dust-streaked, exhausted, yet still standing—I felt a stirring of pride and dread in equal measure.

"We're close," I said quietly. "Too close. Whoever's behind this knows we're coming."

Abdul nodded grimly. "Then he will try to stop us before we reach him."

And so, we pressed onward.

Hours passed. The valley seemed endless, stretching into a gray infinity. Then, just as despair began to take root, the distant thundering of hooves shattered the silence. The ground trembled beneath us.

At first, panic flared—were more enemies coming? But then, through the haze, we saw them—riders in white, their horses adorned with symbols of purity, bows gleaming in the light.

"Hold your fire!" I shouted, raising a hand.

The leading rider spurred his horse forward, raising his arm high in greeting. "Do not fear!" he called. "We are sent by Sufi Baba to aid you in your fight against the darkness!"

Relief washed through the group like a gust of fresh air. The riders dismounted swiftly, moving with purpose and discipline. Their leader approached—a tall, broad-shouldered man with a hawk-like gaze. His white robe was marked with faint traces of soot and old battle scars.

"I am Akram," he declared. "Baba's disciple. I know who commands the djinns that haunt this valley. His name is Yakut—and his evil has plagued these lands for far too long."

His words sent a ripple of anger through us. Yakut. The name itself carried weight—a shadow whispered in fear by villagers for generations. Once a man of knowledge, he had turned to forbidden practices, seeking power through the summoning of dark forces.

"Then let's end him," I said coldly.

Akram's eyes blazed with conviction. "By Baba's command, we will."

Together, we advanced through the narrow gorge until we reached a massive stone door half-buried in the earth. Strange symbols were etched across its surface, glowing faintly with a sickly red hue. The air was thick with the stench of burnt incense and decay.

With combined strength, our men heaved against the ancient barrier. It groaned, then split open with a grinding moan that echoed through the valley.

Inside, torchlight flickered across the walls, revealing an altar draped in black cloth. Candles burned in a ring, their flames flickering blue. In the center stood a lone figure, chanting furiously in a guttural tongue, his hands raised over a smoking bowl.

When he saw us, his voice turned to a snarl. He hurled black stones in our direction; they burst midair with sharp cracks of energy. The room shook. Shadows twisted across the walls.

Akram lunged forward with the fury of a lion, seizing the man by the throat. The hood fell back, revealing a face warped by sin and obsession—eyes sunken, skin stretched taut, lips cracked and

blackened.

“Yakut,” Akram spat, his voice trembling with righteous fury. “I knew you would return to your filth. When Baba cast you out for your sorcery, you swore vengeance. And now you desecrate the dead for your own power!”

Yakut choked, thrashing, his voice a rasping hiss. “You... cannot stop what has begun.”

At my signal, Diljeet and two others surged forward, binding Yakut’s hands with iron chains etched in protective verses. He shrieked and struggled, but the bindings held.

“Destroy the vessel!” Akram ordered. “End it now!”

Near the altar, we found a small effigy—an abominable doll stitched from rags and bone, its mouth filled with nails. Its presence radiated pure malevolence. Yakut screamed as Akram seized it, raising it high before casting it into the flames.

The reaction was immediate. A violent gust tore through the chamber, snuffing out torches and rattling the stones. The very walls seemed to cry out. Black smoke poured from the effigy, writhing like serpents before vanishing into thin air. The shrieking of the djinns echoed one final time—then all was silent.

When the smoke cleared, Yakut lay limp in his chains, his power broken.

We dragged him from the chamber into the sunlight. The valley, once shrouded in mist, now gleamed under a clear sky. The wind carried away the stench of decay, replacing it with the scent of clean earth and freedom.

By dusk, word had already reached the nearby villages. As we rode back, people lined the paths, cheering, weeping, offering garlands and prayers. Children ran beside our horses, shouting blessings. It was as if life itself had returned to the valley.

Yakut was handed over to the authorities, his eyes hollow and unrepentant. He would never see the light of freedom again.

That night, under a sky blazing with stars, Sufi Baba himself appeared at our camp. His calm presence silenced even the restless. He placed his hand upon my shoulder and said, “You have done well, my son. But remember—evil never dies; it only waits for those who forget.”

We bowed our heads in respect.

The rest of our stay was filled with warmth and gratitude. The villagers treated us as heroes—offering food, shelter, and stories of

renewed hope. Laughter returned to the valley for the first time in years.

When we finally returned home, the world outside seemed changed—brighter, safer. Newspapers carried our story, splashed with photographs of our weary but proud faces. They called it *The Miracle of the Valley of the Dead.*

But for us, it was more than a story.

It was a victory over darkness, a battle fought not only with weapons but with faith, courage, and the unyielding light of belief.

And as I gazed once more toward the distant hills, I knew—though the djinns were gone, their whispers would echo in our memories forever.

Part 3

The Headless Ghosts Village

Winter’s Breath and an Unfinished Promise

The first breath of December always carried something electric—like the world itself was holding its breath, waiting for the month’s secrets to unfold. In Karachi, the air was cooler than usual, crisp enough to make you pull your jacket tighter, but warm enough that the scent of chai stalls still drifted lazily down the lanes.

This year, our reunion had a different kind of weight to it. Not just four friends anymore—we were five. Abdul, once a hotel night-watchman, was now part of us. His quiet loyalty and sharp instincts had earned him a permanent place in our circle after the trials of the previous winter.

Amit had insisted we gather at his family’s ancestral home in Hyderabad for the start of the holidays. When Rosy, our jeep, rolled into the driveway just after noon, the sun glinted off the old brass gates, and the laughter inside spilled into the street like a welcome we’d been craving all year.

“Finally!” Amit’s voice boomed as he rushed out, scarf flapping like a banner in the winter wind. “I thought you lot got lost in Karachi traffic—forever.”

Peter hopped out first, carrying a ridiculously oversized gift-wrapped box. “For you,” he said with a mischievous grin. “Or maybe for your goat. I’ll let you decide.”

The front garden was alive with color—marigolds in full bloom, a tall neem tree swaying gently, and the smell of fresh samosas wafting from the kitchen. Amit’s mother had laid out a feast: hot pakoras, sweet jalebis glistening with syrup, and a giant kettle of spiced kahwa steaming in the cool air.

We sank into cushioned charpais under the shade of the neem, sipping tea as the sun dipped lower. Stories began to flow—some real, some outrageously fabricated. Abdul, still shy around the group’s rowdier energy, surprised us all with a perfectly timed one-liner that made even Diljeet choke on his tea.

But amid the laughter, there was a moment—a brief, unspoken shift in the air—when I noticed Amit glance toward the far corner of the garden. A shadow moved there, though no one else seemed to see it. He caught my eye, gave a small shake of his head, and the

moment passed.

The wind rustled through the neem leaves, harsher than before, and for a second the festive garden seemed to darken, as if the sun itself had blinked. A dog barked in the distance, sharp and uneasy, and then silence fell again, too thick, too sudden.

We didn't know it yet, but December had brought us more than holidays and friendship this time. It had brought something unfinished—something waiting. There was a weight in the air, subtle but undeniable, as if the season itself carried secrets. The laughter, the food, the warmth of reunion—all of it was real, yet beneath it ran an undercurrent we could not name. Shadows lingered longer, whispers seemed to travel with the wind. December was not just beginning—it was warning us.

As evening approached, the light softened into a pale gold, the kind that makes everything seem both beautiful and temporary. The garden glowed faintly, and smoke from the kitchen mingled with the scent of earth and flowers.

Inside, Amit's ancestral home looked every bit the relic it was—high ceilings with wooden beams, walls the color of old parchment, and corridors that seemed to hum faintly when the wind passed through. A large portrait of Amit's great-grandfather hung above the main hallway, his painted eyes following us wherever we went.

"Still creepy," Peter murmured, glancing up as we carried our bags in.

Amit chuckled. "He built this house in 1912. My father says he watches over it."

"Yeah," Diljeet replied, grinning, "watches or warns?"

Their laughter echoed down the hall, but it sounded thinner here, somehow. The walls seemed to swallow sound.

Amit's mother called us for dinner soon after sunset. The dining table gleamed beneath a chandelier whose light flickered faintly, not with power fluctuations—but with something more uncertain, more alive. We feasted like kings: mutton biryani rich with saffron, roasted chicken, and creamy kheer that melted on the tongue.

Amit's mother fussed over us endlessly. "You all are too thin!" she declared, piling more food onto our plates. "In my house, no one sleeps hungry!"

Her warmth was infectious, but as she turned to refill a bowl, her bangles clinked softly—and I noticed Amit staring at her with a look I couldn't quite read. Not fear. Not sadness. Something

between the two.

After dinner, we returned to the garden, wrapping shawls around our shoulders as the night deepened. The city beyond the walls had gone quiet except for the occasional cry of a distant train and the hum of crickets. Above us, the sky was vast and clear, a deep indigo sprinkled with stars.

Peter strummed a few chords on his old guitar, and Diljeet sang out of tune on purpose, making everyone laugh. Abdul leaned back against the neem trunk, his eyes half-closed, his smile small but content.

For a while, it felt like time had stopped.

Then the wind shifted again. Cold. Sharp.

The lantern on the low table flickered. The flame wavered sideways, then steadied, but the air around us grew heavier, pressing closer.

Amit looked up toward the far corner again—the same corner from before. I followed his gaze, but saw only the old stone wall and the faint outline of an iron gate that led to the backyard. The marigolds there barely moved.

“Everything okay?” I asked quietly.

He hesitated. “Yeah. Just... thought I saw something.”

“An animal?”

“Maybe.” His tone was unconvinced.

We didn’t press him. None of us wanted to break the illusion of warmth that still clung to the night. But the unease lingered, invisible yet undeniable.

When it grew late, we decided to move inside. The rooms had been freshly aired, but there was still that faint, dry scent of age that never really left such old houses. The corridors felt longer than they should have been, and our footsteps echoed strangely—half a second delayed, as if the house itself was trying to mimic us.

Amit had prepared the guest room with five beds laid out side by side. The walls were adorned with faded paintings of landscapes that no one recognized. A single window faced the garden, its curtains fluttering lightly with the draft.

We talked for hours—about old school days, old mistakes, dreams that had survived and others that hadn’t. Peter, ever the clown, told us about his disastrous proposal attempt. Diljeet confessed that his bakery back home was barely surviving. Abdul shared little, but when he spoke, it was thoughtful—almost

philosophical.

And then there was Amit. He laughed the loudest, told the best stories, but his eyes, I noticed, kept drifting toward the window.

“Hyderabad nights have a sound,” he said suddenly, breaking a lull in conversation. “You’ll hear it later—like a whispering wind, only it’s not wind. My grandmother used to say it’s the past speaking.”

Peter smirked. “You mean ghosts?”

Amit shrugged. “Maybe. But they don’t hurt anyone. Not unless you listen too closely.”

The words hung there, soft but unsettling. None of us replied. The fire in the corner crackled gently, and a clock somewhere in the hall ticked with unnatural precision.

One by one, the laughter faded. The stories thinned out. We drifted into a comfortable silence—the kind that only old friends share, where even quiet feels familiar.

By midnight, the others were asleep. Only I and Amit remained awake.

He sat by the window, staring out into the dimly lit garden. The moon had risen high, silvering the leaves of the neem tree and casting long, skeletal shadows on the ground.

“You really saw something earlier, didn’t you?” I asked softly.

He didn’t turn. “Maybe. Or maybe it was just the wind.”

“But you don’t believe that.”

He smiled faintly. “No. I don’t.”

For a long time, neither of us spoke. The only sound was the slow breathing of our friends and the faint whistle of the wind through the corridors. Somewhere far off, a gate creaked—once, then stopped.

The night deepened. Shadows bled into one another until the room itself seemed to dissolve into darkness.

I must have dozed off at some point, because when I woke, the lamp was still burning low, and Amit was gone from his spot by the window. For a moment, panic stirred—but then I saw him lying in his bed, perfectly still, his face turned toward the wall.

Everything was quiet again. Too quiet.

I tried to fall back asleep, but something about the silence felt wrong. It wasn’t absence of sound—it was the presence of something else. Something listening.

I pulled the blanket tighter and stared at the ceiling. The old fan

creaked slightly, spinning slow circles in the dim light. The air had turned colder.

From the garden outside, a faint rustle broke the stillness—like footsteps brushing through dry leaves. Then nothing.

I told myself it was a cat, or the wind again, or my imagination playing tricks after too many stories and too little rest.

And yet, even as I closed my eyes, I could feel it—that quiet heaviness pressing down from the ceiling to the floor, from the walls to the edge of my mind.

It wasn't fear, not yet. It was anticipation.

Something was waiting.

Something that belonged to December.

And though the house remained peaceful—the laughter of the day still echoing faintly in its corners—I knew, somehow, that the silence had changed.

It wasn't empty anymore.

It was watching.

The Shadows That Walk Without Heads

That winter afternoon carried a strange urgency in the air. The warmth of our reunion at Amit's home was still fresh, but beneath his welcoming smile, I could sense something else—a weight he'd been carrying, waiting for the right moment to share. We sat in his ancestral drawing room, the wooden ceiling beams darkened by decades of monsoon rains, the scent of fresh cardamom tea swirling in the air. Outside, the sun was dipping toward the horizon, its glow turning the neem trees into tall silhouettes. Amit cleared his throat. "I didn't just invite you here to celebrate," he said, looking from one of us to the next. "I need your help. The people in the villages along the banks of the Indus River... they're in trouble." That caught our attention immediately. Diljeet leaned forward, his police instincts sharpening. "What kind of trouble?" Amit's voice lowered. "For centuries, Hindus there have followed the tradition of cremating their dead and scattering the ashes into the Indus. But lately... something has changed. For the past few months, strange creatures have been seen—things that walk like men, but without heads." Peter frowned. "Without heads?" "Yes," Amit said gravely. "At dusk, no one dares leave their homes. Farmers who return late from their fields are pelted with stones from the darkness. The attackers hide behind trees, and no matter how hard the men search, they find no one there. Others speak of... screams." A shiver passed through the room despite the warm tea in our hands. "Every night," Amit continued, "the villagers hear wailing and shrieks. Not from any living creature they know. People are afraid. They can't work their fields after dark. Some are even talking about abandoning their homes entirely." Abdul glanced at me. "And you want us to—?" "To help them," Amit said firmly. "Like we did before. These people are innocent, and they have no one else to turn to. I'm asking you—not just as a friend, but for the sake of those who can't defend themselves." The room fell silent for a long moment. Outside, the evening call to Maghrib prayer echoed faintly, mingling with the rustle of the trees. Finally, I nodded. "Then we go. Together." The others followed with the same resolve. Whatever waited for us along the Indus, headless or not, it would not face the villagers alone. The sky outside dimmed to a bruised violet as the last threads of daylight vanished behind the trees. The

oil lamps Amit's mother had lit filled the room with a golden haze, but even that soft glow could not shake the chill that seemed to seep from the walls. For a while, no one spoke. We just sat, listening to the quiet crackle of the lamp wicks and the distant whine of the wind. Peter finally broke the silence. "So... headless men? You're sure these aren't just stories? You know how villagers talk." Amit rubbed his temples. "I thought so too. Until I went there myself last week." That caught us off guard. "You went alone?" I asked. He nodded. "I had to. One of the villagers is an old friend of my father's. He sent word, begging for help. At first, I thought it might be superstition—a trick of fear or rumor. But on my second night there..." He hesitated. His hands trembled slightly as he reached for his cup of tea. "I saw something." The room seemed to contract around him. Even the ticking of the old grandfather clock in the corner felt distant. "What did you see?" Diljeet asked. Amit's eyes flickered toward the window as though expecting something to be looking back. "It was just past sunset. I was staying in the headman's house, near the edge of the fields. The Indus wasn't far—you could hear it. That low, constant murmur of water moving through the dark. The air smelled of smoke and wet earth. Then... I heard footsteps outside." He paused, swallowing hard. "I thought maybe it was a late farmer returning. But the footsteps didn't sound right. Too heavy, too slow—like something dragging itself along the dirt. I looked through the window and saw a figure walking along the river path." "And?" "It was tall. Broad shoulders. But where the head should've been..." Amit trailed off, his hand hovering mid-air. "Nothing. Just the outline of a neck ending in air. And yet it moved—slowly, deliberately, as though it could still see. I stood frozen until it vanished into the mist." Abdul shifted uncomfortably. "Maybe a trick of the light." Amit looked at him steadily. "That's what I told myself. But the next morning, we found footprints in the mud outside the village—bare feet, deep impressions. They led toward the river... and stopped at the water's edge." The room felt colder after that. Even the flame of the lamp seemed smaller. Peter tried to joke, but his voice came out flat. "So what—you think ghosts are walking out of the Indus now?" "I don't know what to think," Amit admitted. "But the people there believe the souls of the uncremated dead are restless. That something has disturbed the balance." I felt a chill creep up my spine. "Disturbed how?" Amit's eyes met mine. "The floods last summer washed away parts of the

cremation ground. Some say the ashes were never properly dispersed. Others claim something else surfaced—a burial site, maybe older than anyone remembers. They've seen bones—long ones, too white to be from this season." The words hung in the air like frost. Outside, a gust of wind slammed against the window. The latch rattled once, twice, then stilled. Amit's mother called faintly from the kitchen, asking if we wanted more tea, and the ordinary sound broke the tension for a heartbeat. But none of us answered. Later that night, after dinner, we gathered again on the veranda. The sky had turned a deep, smoky blue, and the cold had sharpened. The neem leaves whispered restlessly in the wind, and the oil lamps swayed as if breathing. "Do you really think we can help them?" Abdul asked quietly. "We're not priests or police." "We're friends," I said. "And that's enough. We've faced worse together." Amit smiled faintly, though it didn't reach his eyes. "It's not about bravery this time," he said. "It's about respect. The Indus is old—older than memory. If something stirs in it now, it's because something sacred has been broken." No one replied. The night deepened. Somewhere beyond the garden walls, a stray dog howled—long, mournful, almost human. Peter rubbed his hands together and tried to change the subject, but the air refused to lighten. It was as if the story itself had settled over the house, heavy and unseen. I looked out toward the neem trees, their branches black against the dim glow of the lanterns. For an instant, I thought I saw movement between them—a flicker of shadow that didn't belong to the wind. I blinked, and it was gone. "Strange night," Diljeet murmured. "December," Amit said quietly. "It always brings something strange." When we finally retired to our rooms, the house was utterly still. The wooden floors groaned underfoot, echoing through the corridors like whispers following us. The scent of burning oil hung faintly in the air. I couldn't sleep. My mind replayed Amit's words over and over—the footprints, the headless figure, the disturbed ground. Each image felt sharper in the dark. From somewhere nearby, I heard a faint creak—like a door opening slowly, then closing again. I sat up, listening. Nothing. Just the soft whistle of the wind through the trees. Beside me, Abdul stirred in his bed but didn't wake. Peter snored softly, unbothered by the weight pressing down on the house. I lay back, staring at the ceiling beams etched with age. They reminded me of river roots—twisted, ancient, holding too much history. The wind rose again, carrying

with it a sound—faint but distinct. Not a howl this time. A murmur. Almost like someone whispering from far away. I couldn't make out words, but the rhythm was steady, measured, like a chant. I closed my eyes, telling myself it was the wind slipping through the cracks. But deep down, something in me knew better. There was a pulse to it—slow, deliberate—like the river breathing. And as the hours passed, that sound seemed to move closer, threading through the silence of the house until it was no longer outside, but within. A lamp flickered somewhere in the hall. The shadows along the wall stretched and twisted, reaching up toward the ceiling beams. No one else stirred. The house, the wind, the whispers—all of it seemed to merge into a single, unbroken hum, steady and low. It wasn't fear I felt then, not exactly. It was knowing. The kind that comes before a storm. Something had awakened along the Indus—and somehow, it had already begun to reach for us.

The Road Over the River of Ghosts

The jeep rolled to a stop near the edge of the village, its tires crunching softly on the gravel. Dust swirled lazily in the morning light before settling back to the earth. The villagers, who had been pretending not to stare, now stood still—watching us with a mix of suspicion and fragile hope. Their faces were marked by fatigue, the kind born not from labor but from sleepless nights and unseen terrors. Amit stepped out first, his voice steady as he greeted an elderly man approaching from one of the huts. The man was wrapped in a coarse shawl, his eyes sunken but alert. He looked at Amit for a long moment before recognition softened his face. “You came,” he said quietly. “We weren’t sure anyone would.” Amit clasped his hands together. “We’ll do what we can. These are my friends—they’ve faced such things before.” The old man’s gaze swept over us. For a heartbeat, his eyes lingered on me, as though measuring the truth in Amit’s words, then he nodded slowly. “Come,” he said, motioning toward the village. “You should see what we’re living with.” As we followed, a low wind stirred the dust around our feet. The huts, though simple, were well-kept, their walls plastered with mud and straw. Strings of drying corn hung from the doorways, and the faint clatter of metal utensils echoed from within. Yet despite the normalcy of these sights, a strange heaviness hung in the air—as if the village itself had forgotten how to breathe. Children peered at us from behind doorframes, their eyes wide and solemn. Women whispered prayers under their breath as we passed. The old man led us to a small clearing at the edge of the settlement where the land sloped down toward the Indus. There, among the tall reeds, lay a scattering of stones arranged in a broken circle. Burnt wood and ash were visible between them. “Here,” the man said. “This is where they come.” Abdul crouched beside the stones, running his fingers through the cold ashes. “A cremation site?” The old man nodded. “Yes. For generations. But now... when the fires die, something else rises. We hear it first—the sound of feet, heavy but uneven, walking along the bank. No one dares look out the window. The ones who did...” His voice trailed off, trembling. “They say what they saw had no heads. Only bodies—moving as if searching for something.” Peter frowned, glancing at Amit. “Maybe it’s superstition. Shadows, tricks

of the night—” “You think we haven’t lived with shadows all our lives?” the old man interrupted, his voice rising with a grief that cut through the still air. “No. This is not a trick. These are not stories. They walk. They scream. And they throw stones at anyone who watches.” The silence that followed was heavy. Even Peter, who rarely believed anything he couldn’t see, said nothing. The river flowed behind us, its quiet sound somehow unsettling. It was too calm, too steady—like it was listening. We spent the rest of the day speaking with the villagers, listening to their accounts. Every story carried the same thread: dusk brought footsteps, cries, and the rustle of movement near the river. Those who dared to light lamps said they saw shapes moving between the trees, pale in the moonlight but featureless. As the sun began to dip, we decided to stay near the bank that night. Amit arranged for us to rest in an abandoned fishing shed just beyond the last hut. The place smelled of river water and damp wood. We spread out our gear—lanterns, blankets, and a small camping stove for tea. The villagers watched from a distance, some offering quiet blessings, others too afraid to come close. By twilight, the village had sealed itself in. Doors bolted, lamps extinguished. Not even the dogs barked. The sound of life had folded inward, leaving only the soft whisper of the wind and the endless murmur of the river. Inside the shed, the flame of our lantern flickered weakly. Shadows swayed across the walls like restless spirits. “Feels wrong,” Diljeet muttered, glancing toward the darkened village. “It’s too quiet.” “Maybe that’s their way of coping,” Abdul said. “Pretend nothing’s there, stay silent, hope it passes.” Amit shook his head slowly. “Silence doesn’t stop fear. It feeds it.” His words hung in the air like a prophecy. Outside, the wind shifted, carrying with it a faint sound—almost like a sigh. Peter straightened, listening. “Did anyone else hear that?” We all froze. There it was again—soft, low, almost human, but stretched too long, like the breath of something not meant to breathe. It came from the direction of the river. My hand tightened around the lantern handle. “Probably the wind,” I said, though even I didn’t believe it. Amit moved to the doorway, pushing it open a fraction. The cold air rushed in, carrying the earthy scent of the riverbank. The moon was rising, silvering the reeds and casting long shadows across the water. For a moment, everything was still. Then something rippled just beyond the edge of light—like movement beneath the fog. Not clear, not solid, but there. Amit closed the

door slowly. “Nothing,” he said softly, but his voice trembled. We sat in uneasy silence. Time passed strangely, stretching between each creak of the shed. Somewhere deep inside, I felt the same oppressive sensation I’d felt back in Amit’s garden—that the air itself was waiting. When the clock struck midnight, the sound seemed to echo far too loudly. Then, faintly, from the riverbank, came the hollow clatter of stones. One. Then another. Then another. Each one struck the earth with deliberate rhythm, as though thrown by unseen hands. Abdul rose to his feet, his face pale. “They’re here,” he whispered. No one moved for several seconds. The sound stopped as abruptly as it had begun. Only the rustle of reeds answered, swaying gently in the moonlight. Amit took a deep breath. “Whatever’s out there,” he said, “we’ll face it at dawn. For now, no one goes outside.” And so, we waited. The night pressed on, heavy and endless. Sleep refused to come. Every gust of wind felt like a whisper against the shed, every creak like a step. But nothing broke through the walls, no shape emerged from the darkness. Only the unseen weight of something ancient lingered beyond our reach, just at the edge of the river’s breath. When the first light of dawn finally spilled across the horizon, we stepped outside. The world looked different in the sun—almost innocent. The reeds shimmered with dew, and the Indus flowed quietly, as though mocking our fears. Yet the ground near the water told another story. Imprints—deep, human-like, but misshapen—trailed along the edge of the bank, leading toward the current and then vanishing into it. Peter knelt, brushing the marks with his hand. “They were real,” he said softly. “Something was here.” The others gathered around, staring at the prints that disappeared into the water. Amit’s face was unreadable, his jaw set. “We’ll find out what it wants,” he said finally. “But for now... it’s watching.” The wind rippled through the trees again, whispering through the reeds like the echo of a breath that refused to die. We stood there in silence, the river glinting like a blade in the morning light, and for the first time since arriving, I felt the full weight of what lay ahead. Whatever haunted this place was older than our fears, older than the village itself. And though daylight softened the shadows, it could not erase them. Somewhere in the depths of the Indus, something waited—patient, restless, and aware that we had come.

Rosy’s Journey Through the Heart of Hyderabad

The evening deepened into a soft amber glow as Rosy hummed along the quiet road back toward the main town. A golden haze floated over the fields, and the scent of sugarcane carried on the wind, sweet and earthy. The horizon stretched endlessly, painted in strokes of orange and violet, and the faint silhouettes of distant windmills turned slowly against the fading light. The day had been long, full of laughter and sun, yet none of us felt tired. The kind of exhaustion that came from city life didn’t exist here; this was the kind that filled you with peace instead of emptiness. As the sun sank lower, Amit leaned his head out of the window, the breeze whipping through his hair. “You know,” he said with a smile, “we could stay here forever. Open a small tea shop, sell nothing but peace and chai.” Abdul laughed. “You’d drink all your profits before the first customer arrived.” Peter grinned. “No, no. Amit would charm every traveler with ghost stories and poetry. He’d become the philosopher of the Indus.” Amit laughed, and the sound carried into the wind. Diljeet, who was driving, shook his head. “You lot talk too much. If we ever open a shop, I’m keeping the books.” “Then we’d go bankrupt in a week,” Peter said, and the jeep erupted in laughter again. It was the kind of laughter that came easily—the sound of people who had seen too much of life’s chaos and chosen, for now, to live simply. When we stopped again, it was only because the sky demanded it. The sunset had turned the world into a painting—fields glowing gold, the water in the canal reflecting streaks of fire and rose. We climbed out and stood by the road, each of us quiet for once. The wind whispered through the reeds, carrying the scent of distant cooking fires and the faint rhythm of a folk song from a nearby village. A woman’s voice drifted across the fields—melancholy and beautiful, the kind of song that belonged to the land itself. Abdul closed his eyes. “You don’t hear that in the city,” he murmured. “No,” Amit said softly. “You only hear yourself there.” For a while, we said nothing. The moment didn’t need words. The sun sank fully beyond the horizon, and night unfurled its dark velvet cloak over the countryside. Fireflies began to blink in the grass, their lights flickering like

scattered stars. The road glimmered faintly in the moonlight, and somewhere nearby, a farmer's lantern swayed as he returned home with his oxen. It felt like the world had slowed down just for us, letting us exist outside of time. When we finally reached the outskirts of Hyderabad again, we stopped at a small roadside inn for the night. The owner, a cheerful man with a salt-and-pepper beard, welcomed us as if we were old friends. He gave us a corner table and insisted we try his wife's lentil stew and freshly baked naan. The place was small, lit by lanterns instead of electric bulbs, and filled with the smell of wood smoke and cumin. We ate until we couldn't anymore, our hands glistening with butter and our hearts full. Later, when the others went to rest, I stepped outside for a moment. The sky above was impossibly clear, scattered with stars so bright they looked close enough to touch. The fields nearby were silver in the moonlight, and the air carried the sound of crickets and the faint rush of wind through the trees. I thought about all the journeys we had taken together—the ghosts we'd faced, the towns we'd passed through, the endless miles of road beneath Rosy's wheels—and I realized that this quiet, ordinary trip might have been the most meaningful of all. It wasn't adventure or danger that bound us together. It was the silence between laughter, the shared glances, the knowledge that we belonged nowhere else but here, in this small, fleeting slice of life. The next morning dawned with a soft mist rolling over the fields. Dew clung to every blade of grass, and the world smelled clean and new. The innkeeper's wife brought us breakfast—warm parathas, honey, and strong chai poured into clay cups. We ate outside, watching the mist slowly lift as the sun rose, turning the land gold again. A pair of herons stood in the shallows of a nearby pond, utterly still except for their reflections trembling in the ripples. "You ever think," Abdul said, "about how lucky we are?" "Lucky?" Peter asked, tearing his paratha in half. "To be alive?" "To have this," Abdul said. "To have each other. To see things like this. Most people spend their lives chasing something they can't name." Amit nodded. "We chase something too. But we find it, even if just for a day." His words lingered in the air like morning mist. We finished breakfast in silence, not because we had nothing to say, but because everything had already been said without words. Before leaving, the innkeeper gave us a small earthen pot filled with honey. "From our own hives," he said with pride. "For the road." His kindness was simple and real, the kind

that stayed with you longer than grand gestures. Rosy rumbled back to life as we thanked him and drove on. The day passed lazily, the road winding through sleepy towns and quiet fields. We passed women washing clothes by the river, men herding goats along the banks, and children waving from the doorways of mud houses. Every face seemed to smile, every gesture felt genuine. The simplicity of their lives made ours feel suddenly complicated. Around noon, we stopped by another canal—this one narrower, lined with neem trees that swayed gently over the water. We stretched out under their shade, the grass cool beneath us. Peter dozed with his hat over his eyes. Amit sketched something in his notebook. Diljeet hummed softly to himself, the same tune from the night before, while Abdul tossed pebbles into the water, counting the ripples. I watched the sunlight shimmer through the leaves, the patterns shifting with every breeze. The world seemed perfectly balanced in that moment—neither rushing nor still, neither too bright nor too dim. Just right. After a while, Amit looked up from his sketch. “You ever wonder,” he said, “if we’ll remember days like this when we’re old?” “If we live long enough,” Peter mumbled from under his hat, “I plan to tell everyone how heroic I was at catching fish.” Abdul snorted. “You caught one tiny fish and screamed like it bit you.” “It did bite me!” Peter said indignantly, and we burst into laughter all over again. Even the trees seemed to laugh with us, their leaves rustling in the wind. Time passed gently. By the time the sun began to sink again, our shadows stretched long and thin across the ground. The call of evening prayer drifted faintly from a mosque somewhere across the fields, carried by the wind. We stood by the water one last time before heading back. The canal reflected the colors of the sky—orange, pink, and gold—like liquid fire. Abdul tossed another pebble, and the ripples spread outward, breaking the reflection into a thousand pieces. “Maybe that’s what life is,” Amit said quietly. “One ripple after another.” “And if you’re lucky,” I added, “you make them beside the right people.” Amit smiled. “Then we’re very lucky indeed.” The drive back toward the city was quiet. The headlights cut through the dusk as Rosy purred along the empty road. The air had cooled, and the smell of rain lingered faintly—somewhere far away, a storm was gathering, but here, everything was calm. The first lights of Hyderabad twinkled in the distance like fallen stars. As we entered the familiar streets, the sound of the city rose again—the honk of

rickshaws, the chatter of shopkeepers, the hum of life returning. Yet even amidst it all, something of the countryside clung to us: the peace, the rhythm, the taste of simplicity. When we parked Rosy back in Amit's driveway, none of us moved immediately. The engine ticked softly, cooling in the evening air. Finally, Abdul sighed contentedly. "Back to chaos," he said. "Back to home," Amit corrected. We all nodded. The city might claim us again tomorrow, with its noise and rush and endless demands, but tonight we still carried the countryside within us—the quiet roads, the laughter, the warmth of shared meals, and the feeling that for a little while, we had touched something timeless. And as I looked up at the faint outline of the moon above the rooftops, I thought to myself that perhaps the best journeys were never about where you went, but about what stayed with you after you came home.

The Dilemma of the Restless Souls

Our discussions stretched long into the afternoon, the weight of the subject pressing down on us like a storm waiting to break. What began as a casual breakfast conversation had now grown into the most crucial debate of our journey: how could we free the villagers from the wrath of the headless spirits? The questions clawed at us from every direction, each one heavier than the last. One suggestion was to fulfill the wishes of the dead, granting their spirits closure. But there was a problem—there were too many of them. Each one carried its own sorrow, its own incomplete story. How could we possibly address them all? Another idea was to evacuate the village entirely, relocating the people to safer grounds. Yet, even as the words were spoken, we knew the truth. Where would the villagers go? Their homes, their land, their ancestors' soil—all of it tied them to that place. And even if they left, the danger remained. What if the spirits spread beyond the village, multiplying, consuming new spaces, and eventually drifting into the very heart of the city? The air grew tense with dread. We weren't just talking about a haunting anymore; we were talking about the possibility of an invasion—an unseen army of tormented souls. The idea hung in the air like the stillness before thunder.

Peter broke the silence first. "We need knowledge, not guesses," he said, his voice low but firm. His eyes, sharp with resolve, reflected the golden light pouring through the curtains. "If we go in blind, we're as good as lost." He was right. Without proper understanding, we were fighting shadows with blindfolds on. Knowledge, not courage, would be our greatest weapon. And so, the quiet room turned into a battlefield of thought. Laptops flickered open, phones buzzed alive, and soon the space was filled with the cold glow of digital light. The contrast was jarring—the warmth of the morning had faded, replaced by the sterile glare of screens and the rhythmic tapping of keys. Each of us was lost in our own search, our faces lit by the pale blue of determination and dread.

Hours slipped away unnoticed. The clink of teacups gave way to the soft hum of electricity, the ticking clock fading beneath the weight of our concentration. Amit scrolled through digital archives of ancient Hindu scriptures, his brow furrowed as if decoding a language only half-remembered by time. Abdul leaned against the

armchair, reading through Sufi writings about restless souls—spirits caught between repentance and release. Peter, ever the skeptic turned believer, browsed through collections of South Asian legends, cross-referencing accounts of battlefield hauntings where the dead never found peace. Diljeet, calm but focused, read psychological journals on fear, trauma, and the human mind's ability to manifest the supernatural through collective belief. The soft whir of the ceiling fan was the only sound binding us together.

Every so often, one of us would murmur something—a discovery, a theory, a question. Then the rest would fall silent, listening, absorbing, debating. Slowly, fragments of forgotten knowledge began to piece themselves together, forming a fragile tapestry of hope and horror. From one ancient text Amit found, we learned that headless spirits were bound to the places of their violent deaths, their attachment growing stronger with time if no prayers were offered for them. "The longer they are ignored," Amit read aloud, "the more they hunger for acknowledgment." The words chilled us. It wasn't rage alone that drove them—it was longing.

From another record, Abdul found a passage describing purification by elements. "Fire and water," he said, reading slowly, his voice deepening with each word. "Together, they cleanse the living and the dead. The fire gives light to the lost. The water gives passage to the restless." He looked up, meeting our eyes. "If the villagers light sacred fires at dusk and pour water into the Indus with prayers, it might calm them. It might guide them away." His words carried weight, and for a moment, hope flickered among us.

But then Peter's voice broke the fragile calm. "There's something else," he said, his face pale as he turned his laptop toward us. The screen displayed a scanned excerpt from an obscure source—a forgotten web archive, the text faded and crooked. "It says here," he continued, "that these spirits—the Chhinnamasta Pretas—don't respond to rituals alone. They must be acknowledged by the living. Their pain must be spoken aloud, their loss recognized. Only then will they accept peace." He paused, his throat dry. "It says... those who attempt the ritual must do so at midnight, under open sky, using offerings of food and oil lamps."

The silence that followed was suffocating. The fan above us creaked softly, and somewhere outside, a crow cawed, its cry sharp against the stillness. The idea of calling upon those unseen beings

deliberately, at the darkest hour, was enough to make even the bravest among us hesitate. The digital light flickered against our faces, reflecting the uncertainty in our eyes.

Abdul leaned back in his chair, exhaling heavily. “If even half of this is true,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper, “then we’re not just solving a haunting. We’re walking into sacred ground. We’ll be standing in the space between worlds.”

The words echoed through the room, and no one disagreed. Amit closed his laptop slowly, the sound of the lid snapping shut as final as a door being sealed. “This isn’t something we can take lightly,” he said. “If we misstep—even by a single prayer—we could make it worse.” His gaze swept over us, steady but haunted. “We’ll need guidance. Not just from the books, but from our own faith.”

Diljeet rubbed his temples. “And what if faith isn’t enough?”

Amit’s voice was quiet but unwavering. “Then we make it enough.”

Outside, the afternoon sun had shifted into the burnt gold of evening. Shadows stretched long across the floorboards, curling around the legs of the chairs like silent specters. The light that once warmed the room now carried an edge of melancholy, a subtle reminder of what waited beyond comfort. We had gone searching for knowledge, and knowledge had found us—unforgiving, unrelenting.

I looked around at my friends. Each face told a story of resolve and fear. Peter’s eyes were still fixed on the screen, the faint reflection of the text glowing like a warning. Abdul had his prayer beads in his hand, rolling them slowly between his fingers. Amit stared out the window at the fading sky, lost in thought. Diljeet sat still, arms crossed, the disciplined calm of a police officer masking the unease beneath. And me—I felt the pull of something vast, something ancient, threading itself through the very air we breathed.

I broke the silence softly. “Then it’s decided,” I said. “We’ll prepare the ritual. We’ll do it with respect, not defiance. If they seek acknowledgment, we’ll give it. If they seek peace, we’ll help them find it.”

Amit turned back toward us, his expression solemn. “Before we go,” he said, “each of us should pray according to his own faith. When we stand there, by that river, we’ll be representing not just ourselves, but every soul that still believes in light over darkness.”

The words settled into the room like a vow. Outside, the sun dipped below the horizon, and for a fleeting moment, the entire sky glowed blood-red before fading into dusk. The transition from day to night felt heavier than usual, as though the world itself was holding its breath. The sound of evening prayers began to rise faintly from a distant mosque, mingling with the rustle of wind through the trees. The sacred and the ordinary met for a heartbeat, and I realized—what we were about to face wasn't just supernatural. It was spiritual, moral, human.

As darkness began to seep into the corners of the room, Amit lit a small oil lamp on the table. Its flame flickered, fragile but steady, casting long shadows on the walls. The glow fell across our faces, illuminating determination and fear in equal measure. "We'll need this light where we're going," he said quietly.

No one spoke after that. The silence between us was not emptiness—it was agreement, understanding, unity. We didn't need more words. The night would come soon enough, and with it, the whispers of those who had waited centuries to be heard. For now, we could only prepare our hearts, steady our resolve, and trust that compassion would be stronger than fear.

The clock struck six. The last of the sunlight vanished, leaving only the faint glow of the lamp. Outside, a gust of wind rattled the window panes, and for an instant, the flame wavered—but it did not go out. I took that as a sign.

The path ahead was uncertain, but one thing was clear: the living had been called to answer for the dead, and we would not turn away.

The Eve of the Unknown

By the time the evening shadows stretched across the walls, we were utterly exhausted. The weight of endless discussions had drained our minds and spirits, leaving us hollow and wordless. The room felt heavier with each passing hour—the air thick with the residue of unspoken fear and fatigue. For a long moment, none of us spoke. Even the ceiling fan's steady hum seemed distant, like a lullaby sung by a tired house. Finally, Peter leaned back, rubbed his temples, and broke the silence. "Enough," he murmured. "We can't keep chasing circles. Let's decide."

And we did. After hours of argument, speculation, and silent dread, a decision finally rose from the haze like a fragile flame: we would go to the village at first light. Whatever truths or terrors awaited, we would face them together. Until then, we needed rest—and perhaps a few quiet hours to breathe, to remember that we were still human.

"Let's have some tea," Peter suggested, his voice carrying a tone of finality, as if tea itself could wash away the burdens of the day. The idea was simple, almost childlike, yet in that moment it felt sacred.

Amit called out to his mother in the next room, and within minutes the familiar aroma of cardamom and boiling milk drifted through the air, wrapping around us like a soft blanket. The clink of teacups against the tray echoed gently as his mother placed it on the table. She smiled faintly—kind, unaware of the weight her son and his friends carried—and disappeared into the kitchen once more. We sat there for a while, watching the thin curls of steam rise from our cups, each breath carrying warmth to our tired hands.

The afternoon slipped quietly into tea time. Outside, the sky burned orange and red, the horizon dissolving into streaks of fading light. We sprawled across the sofas, half-lying, half-sitting, eyes fixed aimlessly on the flickering images of the television. News anchors, dramas, and advertisements filled the background, voices clashing and blending into a meaningless hum. But none of it touched us. Our minds were elsewhere—trapped in that invisible village where the headless spirits roamed. Even laughter on the screen felt alien, as though it belonged to another world.

Not a single clue had surfaced from our endless research. No revelation, no sudden breakthrough—just questions circling like vultures over our weary thoughts. The day's energy had been spent,

leaving us in a strange limbo between determination and helplessness. It was as if knowledge itself had turned its back on us. The only option left was clear: we had to go to the village and hear the truth from the people themselves.

Abdul exhaled slowly, his eyes fixed on the floor. “So that’s it,” he said quietly. “We start from the source.”

Peter nodded. “If the dead won’t speak, maybe the living will.”

Amit looked up, his tone more practical. “What we need isn’t written online. It’s there, in their stories—in their memories.”

He was right. What we sought could not be found in screens or scriptures. It was hidden in the lived pain of those who had faced the darkness directly. Their experiences were the only bridge left between reason and the supernatural.

The clock ticked softly in the corner, its rhythm slow and hypnotic. The world outside dimmed further, and the first traces of evening crept through the windows. The golden hue of sunlight faded into a pale, smoky grey.

“What exactly should we ask them?” Abdul finally broke the silence. His voice startled us slightly, not because of its tone, but because it gave shape to what each of us had been silently pondering.

We looked at one another, the weight of unspoken questions reflected in our eyes. There were so many things we needed to understand—too many threads tangled into one haunting mystery.

Amit straightened, his hands clasped together in thought. “We should make a list,” he said. “A sheet of questions—everything that might help us connect the dots.” His voice carried quiet authority, the calm of a man trying to impose order on chaos.

The suggestion landed like a lifeline. Something to focus on. Something practical.

We grabbed pens and paper. For the first time in hours, there was a flicker of renewed energy in the room—a sense of purpose cutting through fatigue.

“What triggered the first haunting?” Peter asked, tapping his pen against his cup.

“How many spirits are believed to be there?” I added, my voice trembling slightly, though I tried to sound composed.

“Do the villagers perform any rituals at night?” Diljeet’s tone was sharp, his investigative instincts kicking in. Even his exhaustion couldn’t dull his discipline.

“And,” Amit added thoughtfully, “is there a connection between the haunting and their ancestors’ ashes?”

We kept going—question after question filling the page like raindrops falling on dry earth. The more we wrote, the more focused we became. Every word felt like an anchor against the storm of uncertainty that waited for us at dawn. This list wasn’t just paper and ink anymore—it was a shield, a small measure of control against the incomprehensible.

As the list grew longer, our tension began to ease. We weren’t solving the mystery yet, but we were preparing to face it. And somehow, that made all the difference.

Outside, the call to Maghrib prayer drifted through the air, soft and solemn. It mingled with the faint rustle of leaves outside the window, grounding us in the real world once more. For a brief moment, peace returned.

Then Amit’s mother called us to dinner. Her voice was gentle but insistent, pulling us back from our thoughts. The aroma that wafted in was irresistible—spices, fried onions, and the earthy scent of freshly baked bread. We exchanged quiet smiles, our minds grateful for the distraction.

The dining room was a welcome contrast to the somber intensity of the lounge. The warm glow of light reflected off the dishes, transforming the table into something almost divine. Platters of chicken curry, lentils, rice, and pickles filled the air with homely comfort. We ate slowly, savoring every bite, grateful for the simplicity of the moment. For a while, no one spoke of hauntings or rituals. No one mentioned fear or spirits. It was just us—friends sharing a meal, laughing softly at old jokes, remembering that life still held warmth beyond the shadows.

I caught myself staring at the flickering flame of the small candle near the rice bowl. The wax dripped slowly down its side, forming translucent ridges like frozen tears. The sight of it was oddly soothing—a reminder that even fragile light can hold its own against darkness.

When the meal ended, Amit’s mother insisted we eat dessert—kheer, rich and creamy, sprinkled with almonds. We obliged, smiling politely, though our minds had already begun to drift back toward what awaited us.

That night, after dinner, we gathered briefly once more in the living room. The list of questions sat folded neatly on the table. It

looked harmless, almost trivial—just a few lines of ink on paper. But to us, it felt like a pact, a promise.

Outside, the night deepened. The hum of distant traffic faded, replaced by the occasional bark of a stray dog. A cool breeze slipped through the open window, carrying with it the faint scent of wet soil and jasmine. The world was quiet, almost too quiet.

We each retired to our rooms early, our minds still buzzing but our bodies heavy with exhaustion. The soft murmur of Amit's parents talking in the next room faded as I lay down. The bed was warm, the sheets faintly smelling of detergent and comfort. For a long moment, I stared at the ceiling, tracing the dance of shadows cast by the streetlight outside. My thoughts wandered—to the villagers, to the spirits, to the dawn that would soon arrive.

I didn't realize when my eyes finally closed.

Sleep came quickly, deeper than it had in weeks. My last conscious thought was not of fear, but of inevitability. Whatever lay ahead could no longer be postponed.

Tomorrow would come, and with it, the path we had chosen. When the sun rose, it would rise not just on another day—but on the beginning of our descent into the unknown.

The Village of Shadows

When the new day arrived, we finished a delicious Hyderabadi breakfast of nihari, freshly baked sheermal, fluffy parathas, and steaming cups of strong chai. The meal was hearty and comforting, and even though the conversation stayed light, there was an undercurrent of nervous energy beneath our laughter. The food filled us with warmth, but the thought of the haunted village loomed like a silent shadow at the edge of every smile. We all knew this breakfast wasn't just another meal—it was a quiet preparation, perhaps our last moment of peace before facing whatever waited for us.

Without wasting a moment, we packed our essentials and decided to head toward the village that Amit had spoken of with such gravity. The morning sunlight was soft, shimmering like gold dust across the rooftops, as we loaded the last of our things into Rosy, our old and faithful jeep. Peter took the wheel, stretching his arms with a grin that seemed braver than he felt. Amit sat beside him, map in hand, his brow furrowed with focus. The rest of us took our places in the back, the hum of the engine quickly swallowed by the noise of the waking city.

As the streets of Hyderabad began to thin, the world opened up before us. The air shifted—less smoke, more earth. Soon the smooth city roads gave way to uneven terrain, where the ground seemed to breathe under Rosy's tires. Dust swirled around us in golden spirals, and the scent of the countryside filled our lungs: wet soil, the faint sweetness of sugarcane, and the musky odor of grazing cattle.

The road, however, was not easy. At one point, we had to take a diversion below an old bridge, its stonework cracked with age and half-hidden under vines. The passage was narrow, and the ground beneath us turned thick with clay. The wheels struggled, spinning deep ruts into the earth. Peter gritted his teeth, his hands tightening on the steering wheel, as Rosy lurched forward with a roar of protest. Sweat glistened on his forehead. Each time the tires sank, we pushed, heaving against the weight, our shoes caked with mud. Yet, somehow—through sheer effort and a little luck—we managed to carry on until the landscape widened into something breathtaking.

Before us lay a valley of quiet splendor. Lush greenery rolled

across the land like a living carpet. Tall trees lined both sides of the dirt path, their leaves whispering softly in the breeze as if exchanging secrets. The sunlight streamed through the branches in thin golden rays, painting dappled patterns on the road. Birds darted between the trees, their songs echoing faintly, giving the place an almost sacred stillness.

We slowed down, taking in the view. A sense of peace washed over us, momentarily dulling the memory of the grim stories that had brought us here. Ahead, life seemed normal—too normal. Children played in open fields, their laughter ringing through the air. Some were engaged in cricket, shouting gleefully as the ball soared high; others kicked worn-out footballs through clouds of dust. Nearby, a group of girls played hopscotch, their colorful scarves fluttering in the breeze. The entire scene was a portrait of innocence and joy, standing in painful contrast to the fear that hung like an invisible shroud over this place.

"Park the jeep here," Amit said finally, his tone firm but calm. "We've reached the village."

Peter eased Rosy to a stop beside a cluster of banyan trees. Amit pointed toward a small hut at the far end of the dirt lane—a modest structure with a thatched roof and smoke curling lazily from a small clay chimney. "That belongs to Vikram Baba, the leader of this village," he explained. "He's a good man... I share a strong bond with him."

We climbed out of the jeep, stretching our stiff limbs. The ground felt different here—softer somehow, yet heavy, as though soaked in unspoken memories. Chickens darted across the path, and a few villagers paused their work to watch us curiously from a distance. Their faces carried no hostility, only quiet caution, the kind born from long months of fear.

Amit led the way to the hut. He knocked softly on the wooden door. For a moment, there was no response—only the faint rustle of wind brushing against dry leaves. Then, the door creaked open, and a dignified man stepped out.

Vikram Baba's presence was quietly commanding. His white kurta was simple but spotless, his silver hair tied neatly at the back. The deep lines on his face spoke of wisdom and endurance. His eyes, though aged, were warm and perceptive, carrying the weight of one who had seen too much. When he saw Amit, his expression softened instantly. "Amit beta!" he exclaimed, embracing him with

genuine affection. His voice held both relief and gratitude. Then, turning toward us, he folded his hands respectfully. “Welcome, my sons. Any friend of Amit’s is a friend of this village.”

“These are my friends,” Amit said, his tone earnest. “We have come here to help you and your people.”

Vikram Baba nodded, motioning for us to sit on a wooden bench just outside the hut. He poured water from a clay pot into steel tumblers and offered them to us. The water was cool, grounding—its freshness cutting through the heat of the afternoon. For a few minutes, we simply sat in silence, feeling the weight of his gaze, sensing that he understood exactly why we had come.

Finally, I cleared my throat and asked the question that had been burning in my mind. “Baba,” I began softly, “when did these hauntings begin?”

The elder’s eyes darkened. His hands, which had been steady moments ago, tightened around his tumbler. “Son,” he said gravely, “our lives here were always peaceful. We are simple people. But about four months ago, strange things began to happen. Since then, we have known no rest.”

“Was there anything unusual that happened during that time?” I pressed gently. “A murder, perhaps? Or a suicide? Something that might have disturbed the balance?”

He shook his head, his expression troubled. “No such tragedies. We have a Shamshan Ghat nearby—yes—but it has always been a place of peace. Generations of our ancestors have been cremated there. Never before has it been touched by darkness.”

A heavy stillness fell over us. The air seemed to thicken, as if listening.

I leaned forward slightly, lowering my voice. “Then who was the first to witness these... events?”

Baba exhaled, the sound deep and weary. “My own son, Rohit,” he said. “He was returning home from the farms one evening—it was around eight o’clock. He heard voices whispering in the darkness. At first, he thought it was just the wind. But then stones began to fall near his feet. He looked back, and there, just beyond the banyan trees, he saw a man in white standing behind him.”

The old man paused, his gaze fixed somewhere far away. “The figure had no face,” he whispered. “No head... only a trembling light where one should have been. Rohit ran all the way home, breathless, terrified. Since that night, many others have seen and

heard the same."

A shiver rippled through us, though no one spoke. Even Amit's expression, usually calm, had hardened into quiet unease.

"People say," Baba continued, his voice trembling slightly, "that when they ride their bicycles home after sunset, they feel a weight pressing behind them—as if someone is sitting silently on the backseat. The heaviness grows until they can hardly breathe. And always, it is after sunset. None of us dare to step outside once the light fades."

He looked around nervously before adding, in a voice barely above a whisper, "When we try to hire guards to patrol the village, they refuse. They say they value their lives too much. At night, the air fills with cries—soft at first, then rising like waves of grief. We hear weeping... calling... sometimes laughter that isn't human. It pierces the heart. It chills the blood."

The silence that followed was absolute. Even the wind seemed to have stopped moving. We could hear our own breathing—uneven, shallow. In that stillness, it became painfully clear that this was no mere tale spun by frightened villagers. This was real. The fear in Vikram Baba's eyes was real. The exhaustion etched into his face was real.

Each of us exchanged glances—unspoken, uneasy. The truth pressed down on us like invisible hands. Whatever haunted this village was not a rumor. It was a torment that lived and breathed among them, night after night, unseen but undeniable.

And tomorrow night, it would be our turn to face it.

Whispers from the Unseen

By the time the voice faded into static, the room had become a vault of silence. No one dared to move, breathe, or even blink. The five of us sat frozen, staring at the laptop screen as if it had become the mouth of another world. Abdul's hand trembled slightly, his knuckles white against the edge of the table. "Did... did you all hear that?" he whispered, his voice dry as dust. Peter nodded slowly, his face drained of color. "It said... release us. There's no mistake. Those were its exact words."

For a long moment, no one spoke. The sound still lingered in the air—an echo that refused to die. Then Amit, his eyes wide and unblinking, muttered, "They're trapped. That's what this means. The spirits... they're trapped in that valley."

I leaned back, trying to calm my racing thoughts. Every theory, every ritual we had studied the night before flashed through my mind like fragments of broken glass. "It's a plea," I said at last. "Not a threat. Not a curse. A plea for freedom."

Diljeet ran his hands through his hair, pacing restlessly across the room. "Then why the attack? The stones, the roaring... why all that violence if they just want peace?"

"Because they're in pain," Abdul answered softly, his eyes glistening in the dim light. "Pain makes you lash out. Even the dead can suffer."

The truth of his words hung over us like a heavy fog. We sat there in the pale glow of the laptop, the sound of that voice playing again and again in our minds. There was a hollow ache in my chest —a feeling that we were now tied to those spirits in some unspoken way, bound by the echo of their sorrow.

Peter finally broke the silence. "We need to go back."

The words struck like thunder.

Amit turned to him sharply. "After what happened? Are you insane?"

Peter didn't flinch. "No. Think about it. They asked for help. We can't just walk away now. What if this is their only chance?"

The others looked at me, waiting for my decision. My mind was torn between fear and purpose. The image of those unseen shapes on the thermal camera, the stones falling from nowhere, the pleading voice—all of it swirled inside me like a storm. "We'll go

back," I said finally, the words tasting like iron on my tongue. "But not tonight. Tomorrow. We'll plan carefully, and we'll go with faith."

That night, sleep was impossible. I lay awake listening to the sound of the wind brushing against the windows, each whisper carrying the faintest hint of that voice—"Please... release us..."—as if the spirits themselves had followed us back from the valley.

When dawn finally broke, the first light of the sun poured gently through the curtains, bathing the room in gold. The air felt different—still heavy, but not with dread. It was as if the night had passed, leaving behind a strange calm, a fragile thread of hope.

Amit's mother brought us breakfast—warm halwa puri, spicy chana, and cups of steaming tea fragrant with cardamom. The meal filled us with a sense of grounding, pulling us back into the world of the living. Yet, beneath that warmth, the weight of our mission lingered.

After breakfast, we gathered around the dining table, turning our thoughts once again to the haunting. "We have to find out *why* they're trapped," I said, opening my notebook filled with scattered notes and theories. "Something must have gone wrong—a ritual, a burial, an unfinished ceremony. We can't release them until we understand what binds them."

Peter nodded. "Let's talk to Baba again. He may know something more, something he didn't mention before."

We drove back to the village under the clear morning sky. The road, once ominous, now shimmered gently in the light. The fields glistened with dew, and the villagers moved about quietly, their faces etched with fatigue and fear. Even the laughter of the children from the previous day had vanished, replaced by a nervous hush that spread through the air.

When we reached Baba's hut, he greeted us with a tired smile, as though he had not slept either. "You went there last night," he said gravely. "I could feel it. The air changed. The wind cried differently."

Amit stepped forward. "Baba, we recorded something—voices. They asked us to release them."

Baba's expression tightened. "Then they are indeed restless souls. I feared as much."

I asked gently, "Do you know what could have bound them here? Some tragedy? Some unperformed ritual?"

The old man lowered his gaze. “There is one thing... something our elders once spoke of, long forgotten by most.”

We leaned closer, listening intently as Baba began to recount an old tale. “Decades ago, before I was born, there was a great flood in this valley. It destroyed everything—homes, crops, lives. Many people perished, their bodies swept away before proper last rites could be performed. The river carried them off, leaving their souls restless, wandering without peace. My father used to say that when the moon turns red, the valley remembers.”

A chill ran through me. The headless spirits, the voices, the sorrow—it all began to align. These weren’t isolated hauntings; this was the cry of many souls who had been denied release for generations.

Peter’s voice was low, almost reverent. “Then we have to finish what was left undone. We have to give them the prayers they never received.”

Baba’s eyes glistened with emotion. “If that is your path, then may the divine guide you. But beware—some among them may not wish to leave. They have forgotten peace.”

The sun climbed high overhead, casting long beams through the open doorway. Dust motes danced in the light like tiny spirits themselves, drifting gently through the air. I looked at my friends, each one silent, lost in thought. What lay ahead would test not just our courage, but our faith.

As we prepared to leave, Baba placed his hand on my shoulder. “Remember, son,” he said softly, “the dead do not seek harm. They seek remembrance. Treat them with respect, and they may listen.”

His words settled deep within me.

As we stepped outside, the wind picked up, carrying with it the faint scent of the river. I glanced toward the distant valley where the haunting waited, a place now heavy with history and pain. The sunlight shimmered on the horizon, but beneath that glow, I could almost sense the unseen eyes of the spirits, watching, waiting.

The day stretched before us like a path of fate. We had crossed the threshold—no longer mere visitors, but participants in a struggle between the living and the forgotten dead. And somewhere beyond the hills, the voice that had cried *release us* still lingered in the wind, a whisper that would not fade until its wish was fulfilled.

That evening, as the sun dipped low, we packed our bags in silence. Tomorrow would be the night of truth—the night we would

return to the valley, not as investigators, but as messengers of peace.

Each of us knew the risk. But beneath our fear burned something greater—an unspoken promise, to free those who could no longer speak for themselves.

And as darkness fell once more over the land, I found myself standing by the window, staring toward the horizon. The wind stirred the trees, their branches swaying like shadows of souls yearning for rest. For the first time since our journey began, I whispered into the night, not with fear, but with compassion:

“We’ll release you... I promise.”

The breeze shifted gently, cool and calm, as though the valley itself had heard.

The Final Chapter

The morning sunlight poured through the windows like molten gold, spilling across the breakfast table and glinting off the cups of steaming chai. For a brief moment, the warmth felt deceptive—too bright, too ordinary, as though the world outside wasn't steeped in mystery and unease. Yet beneath that calm surface, every one of us carried the same thought: *we were getting closer to the truth.*

The air was thick with a quiet intensity as we ate. The soft crackle of parathas, the scent of spiced potatoes and herbs, the sweet drizzle of honey over toast—all of it seemed muted against the weight of the previous night's discoveries. Each bite felt mechanical, our minds too occupied to truly taste. Peter tapped his spoon against his cup, breaking the silence. "There's something the villagers aren't seeing," he murmured, eyes fixed on his tea. "Something *outside* their village. Spirits don't just appear out of nowhere."

I nodded, folding my arms on the table. "Exactly. If the hauntings began four months ago, something must have triggered them. Maybe deaths that weren't recorded—or worse, deaths that were *ignored*."

Diljeet leaned forward, his commissioner's authority slipping into his tone. "We'll find that missing link. Let's start where facts still hold meaning—at the police station."

The decision came as naturally as breathing. We had dealt with spirits, yes, but we were still men of reason, bound by duty and logic. Perhaps the dead only sought justice, not fear.

After breakfast, we set out for the zonal police station. The drive was long, the road winding through golden fields and clusters of banyan trees whose gnarled roots gripped the earth like claws. Dust rose in lazy spirals behind our jeep as the hum of the engine filled the tense silence between us. Amit sat beside Peter, occasionally giving directions, while Abdul whispered verses under his breath—a quiet prayer for courage.

When the station finally came into view, a modest white building with peeling paint and the smell of old paper drifting from within, Peter parked the jeep and straightened his jacket. We entered as a group, our official IDs lending us both authority and mystery. The constables straightened instantly, saluting.

The Station House Officer greeted us with practiced politeness, his eyes flicking over our badges. “Please, gentlemen, have a seat,” he said, waving to the chairs before his desk. His tone was warm, yet cautious, as if sensing the gravity of our visit. Moments later, a constable arrived with five steaming cups of tea. The fragrant steam curled upward, mingling with the faint hum of ceiling fans.

After exchanging formalities, I leaned forward. “Sir, we need information. Were there any drownings, suicides, or missing persons reported in the past four months—especially near the river that flows by Vikram Baba’s village?”

The SHO’s expression shifted from cordial to grim. He called for an inspector, who entered carrying a heavy stack of files, their edges frayed from handling. Pages rustled as he turned them, the silence in the room growing taut. Finally, he looked up, his brow furrowed. “There were eight men,” he said slowly, “criminals. They escaped custody during transport. When police cornered them near the river, they leapt in. None were recovered.”

His words seemed to still the air itself. Even the hum of the fan faded into the distance. Eight men—gone without a trace. The same number of voices we had recorded. The realization sent a chill crawling through my spine.

“Can you take us there?” I asked.

The SHO nodded gravely. “It’s not far. But I warn you—it’s not a place people visit willingly anymore.”

When we reached the site, the landscape seemed to mourn its own silence. The river glided darkly under a pale sun, its surface rippling like black silk. A crowd had gathered near the banks, watching us with a mixture of fear and fascination. Their whispers floated through the still air like ghosts of their own.

I stepped forward and asked, “Does this river divide anywhere?”

A young man pointed toward the horizon, where a faint line of trees marked the beginning of another village. “Yes, sahib,” he said nervously. “A branch flows there—toward the Hindu settlement. People say strange things happen near that stretch after sunset.”

I raised my binoculars. Through the lenses, the village appeared shrouded in a quiet melancholy—the huts half hidden under trees, the faint shimmer of smoke curling from kitchen fires, and beyond that, the very air seemed to ripple with something unseen. I lowered the binoculars and turned to the others. “That’s where it ends,” I said. “And that’s where it began.”

We thanked the SHO and locals, then returned to Baba Vikram's hut, the weight of discovery heavy in our hearts. When Amit explained what we had learned, Baba's eyes glistened with understanding. Without hesitation, he summoned five of his strongest divers, men with sun-darkened skin and the steady gaze of those accustomed to danger.

The divers stripped down to their essentials, tied ropes around their waists, and slipped silently into the dark waters. The river swallowed them one by one. For nearly an hour, nothing but the sound of splashing and the rhythmic pull of ropes echoed through the valley. Then, suddenly—"I've found something!"

The shout tore through the silence. A diver surfaced, clutching what at first looked like driftwood—but as it broke the surface, our breaths caught. A human skull, its hollow eyes staring into nothingness.

The others dove back, urgency replacing fear. When they emerged again, the scene before us froze our blood. One by one, they dragged the remnants of human lives from the river—bones tangled in weeds, fragments of cloth clinging to skeletal frames, the mute testimony of a forgotten death. Eight in total.

Amit fell to his knees, whispering a prayer. Abdul closed his eyes, his lips moving in silent recitation. Peter's fists clenched. None of us spoke. The dead had revealed themselves at last.

With Baba's permission, we dug a large pit near the riverbank. The villagers gathered in a solemn circle as the skeletons were laid within, their forms brittle and pale under the afternoon light. Abdul poured petrol across the remains, the sharp scent burning our nostrils.

"Stand back," I said quietly.

The matchstick trembled slightly in my hand before I flicked it into the grave. The moment the flame touched the fuel, a great roar rose—a sound not of fire, but of release. The blaze leapt high, devouring the bones in waves of orange and gold. And then, before our astonished eyes, something miraculous happened.

From within the fire, vaporous figures began to rise—translucent forms, twisting and shimmering like smoke given life. Their faces were indistinct, yet their presence was undeniable. They ascended slowly, merging into the sky like clouds carried by divine breath.

The villagers fell to their knees, weeping. The air was filled with a strange peace, an almost sacred silence that replaced the heavy

dread of before. A gentle wind swept through, carrying away the final wisps of smoke as though the earth itself sighed with relief.

"Our mission is accomplished!" I cried out, my voice breaking the stillness.

The villagers erupted in cheers. Tears flowed freely, and laughter, long forgotten, returned to their lips. They lifted us onto their shoulders, chanting blessings, calling us saviors. In that moment, every fear, every sleepless night, felt worth it.

Before leaving, I turned to Baba. "Your village is safe now," I said softly. "But promise me—this must remain between us. Some truths are meant to protect, not to prove."

Baba clasped my hands, his eyes shining. "I promise, my son. May the spirits bless you for giving them peace."

That night, as we drove back through the quiet countryside, none of us spoke. The hum of the jeep, the rustle of the wind—it all sounded strangely soothing, like the lullaby of a land finally freed from sorrow.

A week later, we returned to the village. What awaited us was nothing short of a miracle. The air felt lighter, filled with laughter and music. Children ran freely through the fields once more, and the women sang while drawing water from the wells. The nights, once haunted by cries, now carried only the hum of crickets and the rustle of leaves. The curse had lifted.

With the haunting behind us, we spent our remaining days in Hyderabad. We wandered through the bustling bazaars of Laad Market, where the air smelled of jasmine and sandalwood. We stood beneath the towering arches of the Charminar, glowing in the amber light of dusk. We feasted on biryani rich with saffron, savored haleem slow-cooked to perfection, and ended our nights with sweet double ka meetha.

Laughter returned to our hearts. The horrors we had witnessed became stories whispered over cups of tea, tales of faith, fear, and redemption.

And for the first time in many weeks, as the sun dipped behind the minarets and the world turned golden and still, we felt truly at peace—knowing that somewhere, far beyond the horizon, eight restless souls had finally found their way home.

Part 4

Hellhound : The Hound of Darkness

December's Reunion: After a Year Apart

Yet another December had arrived, and with it came that familiar crispness that whispered of secrets waiting to unfold. The month always carried a certain magic—a hush that seemed to descend upon the world just before nightfall, when the mist rolled in and the air shimmered faintly beneath the streetlights. This time, our reunion took us far from Karachi's restless coasts and Hyderabad's haunted valleys to Sialkot—Peter's hometown, where history hummed beneath the rhythm of hammers and steel.

Sialkot, a city of artisans and dreamers, greeted us with open arms. The streets pulsed with life: rickshaws buzzed like restless beetles, their headlights cutting through the fog; children chased each other through narrow lanes; and the scent of roasted peanuts mingled with the slow, simmering fragrance of paya curry bubbling in iron pots along the roadside. Everywhere, there was warmth—alive, human, familiar.

Peter's ancestral home stood proudly at the edge of an old neighborhood, a two-story haveli with arched windows and carved balconies that bore the craftsmanship of a bygone era. The iron gate creaked open as we arrived, revealing a courtyard lit by strings of yellow bulbs that swayed gently in the winter breeze. Marigolds bloomed in earthen pots, their orange petals glowing like embers against the dusk. The house, though weathered, exuded a quiet dignity. Every brick, every hinge seemed to breathe with stories of generations past.

Peter welcomed us inside with his usual grin, his voice echoing down the hallway. "My friends, my brothers—Sialkot welcomes you!" he declared, his hands wide open as if embracing the air itself. We laughed, one by one stepping into the house that smelled faintly of wood polish and old memories. The floors creaked underfoot; the walls were adorned with fading portraits—faces from another time, their eyes gazing down as though recognizing us.

That night, we sat together in the courtyard wrapped in shawls, the firepit crackling between us. Abdul brewed strong Kashmiri chai in a kettle blackened by years of use, the aroma of saffron and crushed almonds rising into the cold night air. Laughter flowed

freely—stories from our youth, from haunted valleys and forgotten missions. Yet beneath the laughter, there was a stillness, a fragile peace that none of us wanted to disturb.

The next morning began with the sounds of Sialkot waking—the call of the fruit vendor, the clang of bicycle bells, the murmur of morning prayers drifting from nearby mosques. Peter's mother, graceful even in her old age, served us breakfast with a warmth that felt like sunlight: parathas glistening with butter, omelets spiced with coriander, and sweet chai poured into chipped cups.

After the meal, Rosy—our faithful, dust-streaked jeep—waited for us at the gate, ready to begin her journey through yet another city of mysteries. The roads shimmered faintly under the weak winter sun as we drove through Sialkot's bustling arteries. Peter sat at the wheel, humming a tune, while Amit leaned out of the window, capturing fleeting moments on his camera—the vendors selling colorful balloons, the children waving from rooftops, the women in bright shawls bargaining over spices.

Our first stop was Iqbal Manzil, the birthplace of Allama Iqbal—the poet who dreamed of a nation before it was born. The haveli stood silent and proud, its arched corridors whispering of an age when ink and words could move mountains. As I stepped inside, a strange reverence filled the air. The sunlight streaming through the latticed windows painted golden patterns on the tiled floor, and for a moment, it felt as though time had folded upon itself. We wandered through rooms filled with books, manuscripts, and photographs—each relic a fragment of a legacy that still breathed in Pakistan's soul.

Diljeet, usually the most practical of us, grew unusually quiet. He stood before one of Iqbal's portraits, his eyes glistening with something like awe. "Imagine," he murmured, "how one man's words could light fires that never die." None of us replied. We didn't need to. The silence said enough.

By afternoon, Rosy carried us to the Sialkot Fort. The ancient walls, rough and pitted by centuries of weather and war, rose high against the pale sky. The wind howled through the gaps in the stones, carrying with it a strange whisper that could almost be mistaken for voices. Standing atop the ramparts, we gazed down at the city sprawling below—a patchwork of red roofs, minarets, and markets alive with sound. The view was breathtaking, yet there was something haunting in its beauty, as though beneath the laughter

and light, the earth still remembered every cry, every drop of blood shed on these stones.

When evening fell, the city shimmered under a thousand lights. Strings of bulbs wound around trees, music floated from teahouses, and the air was heavy with the scent of roasted corn and sugarcane. We found ourselves at a small dhaba on the outskirts, where men sat cross-legged on charpoys, sipping tea and humming along to qawwali singers in the corner. The singers' voices rose and fell like waves—deep, soulful, eternal.

Plates of chapli kebabs arrived, sizzling hot, followed by fried fish drenched in lemon juice. We devoured them eagerly, the cold biting at our fingers as steam rose from our plates. Then came the nihari—rich, dark, and fragrant—and finally, gulab jamuns that melted on the tongue like warm honey.

Laughter filled the night. Abdul, normally reserved, surprised everyone by clapping along to the music, his rhythm so infectious that even Peter joined in. The air was alive with joy, the kind that felt rare and precious after all we had endured. Yet, as I looked around, a strange unease crept over me. The shadows beyond the dhaba seemed to move—not with the wind, but with intention.

As we made our way back through the narrow lanes, the night grew colder, the mist thicker. The call of the azaan echoed softly, blending with the distant hum of traffic. The glow from the streetlights seemed weaker here, swallowed by fog. At one point, I thought I saw someone behind us—a shape, tall and still, standing near the mouth of an alley. But when I turned, there was nothing. Only the flicker of a lantern and the slow drift of smoke from a food stall.

I said nothing to the others. Perhaps it was the trick of the light, or perhaps it was something else—something old, watching from the shadows of this ancient city.

The following days passed like a dream. We explored Sialkot's bustling markets, where leather goods hung in neat rows and the rhythmic hammering of craftsmen filled the air. The smell of tanned hide, oil, and polish clung to our clothes. We watched artisans shape steel into scalpels, their hands moving with precision honed by generations. There was beauty in their work—discipline and devotion that mirrored the spirit of the city itself.

At night, we would return to Peter's courtyard, where a small fire awaited us. We talked for hours—of the past, of the haunted

places we had freed, of the mysteries still unsolved. Sometimes, the conversation drifted toward the supernatural, and a chill would pass through the group, though none of us would admit it.

One night, the power went out. The courtyard plunged into darkness, save for the dying embers of our fire. In that sudden stillness, even the crickets fell silent. The wind picked up, carrying a faint, mournful sound from somewhere deep within the house. Abdul froze. “Did you hear that?” he whispered.

Peter smiled faintly, brushing it off. “Old houses make old noises,” he said. But the sound came again—soft, almost like a sigh, rising and fading with the wind. For a long moment, no one spoke. Then Amit laughed nervously and tossed another log into the fire, breaking the spell. The flames flared, and with them, warmth returned.

That week in Sialkot was more than just a holiday. It was a homecoming of souls—a reminder of friendship, faith, and the quiet beauty of moments shared beneath an open sky. We roamed through history, feasted on tradition, and found laughter where once there had been fear.

Yet beneath it all, something lingered. A presence unseen but not unfelt. It clung to the corners of memory, to the echo of footsteps in empty alleys, to the silence between heartbeats.

December had reunited us, yes—but it had also brought something else. Something waiting. Something that whispered our names softly in the night, as if reminding us that peace, too, is just another moment before the next haunting begins.

The Awakening of the Hellhound

The first week of our holidays had passed in a blur of laughter, exploration, and discovery. Sialkot had embraced us with open arms, and every day had unfolded like a new story waiting to be told. We wandered through the narrow lanes of its bazaars, where vendors called out their prices in sing-song tones, where the smell of roasted corn and freshly ground spices lingered in the cool December air. Every corner offered a surprise—an antique store hidden behind embroidered curtains, an old bookseller who claimed his shop once supplied pens to Allama Iqbal himself, a street musician playing haunting tunes on his flute beneath the yellow streetlights.

The food was its own kind of adventure. Every meal seemed to hold a piece of the city's soul—the fiery chapli kebabs that melted in the mouth, the delicate fried fish served with mint chutney, the soft khamiri roti brushed with ghee. We ate till our stomachs hurt and laughed till our eyes watered, the kind of laughter that made the cold night air feel warm again.

History followed us wherever we went. At the Sialkot Fort, we stood before its massive, crumbling walls, imagining armies and kings long gone. The stones seemed to hum with memories—of battles fought, oaths sworn, and lives lost. Later, at the Iqbal Manzil, the air itself seemed steeped in poetry. The rooms smelled faintly of ink and dust, and the sunlight slanted through the wooden lattice, catching the motes that danced lazily in the air. I remember pausing before Iqbal's portrait—his eyes seemed alive, as though he still watched over dreamers, still whispered to those who dared to think beyond their time.

Even the sacred places of Sialkot carried their own mysteries. When we visited the shrine of Imam Ali-ul-Haq, the crowd moved like a tide of faith, every candle flame trembling in devotion. The air was thick with the fragrance of rose petals and burning incense. The marble floor was cold beneath our feet, and the sound of qawwals singing in the courtyard rose and fell like prayer itself. As we made our way back through the alley, Diljeet began telling ghost stories, his voice low and teasing. The candlelight cast long shadows on the walls, and though we laughed, the flickering glow made each turn of the alleyway feel deeper, darker, more ancient.

By the end of the week, a rare calm had settled upon us. For once, there were no desperate calls for help, no haunted cries breaking our sleep. No restless spirits calling out for peace. It was as though the world had gone still, granting us a brief mercy. The air felt lighter, our hearts unburdened. For the first time in years, it felt like a true holiday—ours alone.

That morning dawned in gold. The sky blushed pink above the rooftops as sunlight spilled into Peter's courtyard. The cold air carried the smell of frying puris and cardamom tea. We sat together, wrapped in shawls, our laughter mingling with the steam rising from our plates.

The breakfast spread was a feast worthy of royalty. Halwa puri glistened with oil, golden and fragrant; the chana masala bubbled with spice, its aroma enough to make anyone's stomach growl. Beside it, a pot of nihari simmered slowly, its surface shimmering with ghee. Crispy parathas towered on a tray, and bowls of creamy yogurt and tangy pickles completed the meal. The table was chaos —voices overlapping, hands reaching, jokes flying faster than anyone could respond.

"Now this," Amit declared dramatically, tearing his puri with flair, "is what happiness tastes like. Forget ghost hunting—this is our true calling!"

We burst out laughing, the courtyard echoing with it. Even Abdul, ever the quiet one, chuckled as he poured more tea. The laughter rose like smoke into the morning sky, warm, unbroken— until the television crackled to life.

Abdul had switched it on casually, reaching for the remote as if out of habit. But the sound that followed wasn't music or a morning show—it was the voice of a newscaster, tense and clipped.

"Breaking news," she announced, her face grave. "A terrifying incident has been reported in the town of Gharo. Witnesses claim a strange, monstrous creature has been seen roaming the streets of Shams Society. Residents describe it as resembling a dog, though far larger—its eyes glowing red, its movements unnaturally fast."

The spoon slipped from Diljeet's hand, clattering against his plate. The noise seemed to echo too loudly in the silence that followed.

"Authorities have urged citizens to remain indoors," the anchor continued. "Police patrols have been increased, though no attacks have yet occurred. Panic has spread as more residents claim to have

seen the creature in the dead of night."

Then came the footage. Shaky, grainy, filmed through a half-open window. The image flickered, struggling to stay in focus, but the outline was unmistakable—a massive, shadowy beast moving on all fours down a dimly lit street. Its head turned suddenly toward the camera. For a second, the screen froze on its eyes—two blazing red orbs that seemed almost alive, pulsing with hatred.

A chill swept over the courtyard. Even the wind seemed to still.

"Ya Khuda..." Diljeet whispered, his voice trembling. "Did you see that?"

Amit leaned forward, disbelief furrowing his brow. "Could be fake. Some animal gone wild, maybe a bear... or a trick of light."

But I could feel my pulse quickening. My instincts had learned long ago to recognize the shift in the air—the way the world seemed to hold its breath when something beyond it stirred.

Peter tried to break the tension with a smirk, though his voice was tight. "Well, gentlemen, I think it's safe to say—vacation's over."

His words landed like stones in still water. The laughter from moments ago was gone, replaced by a silence that pressed in from all sides.

I looked at each of them in turn—Amit's jaw set in skepticism, Diljeet pale and shaken, Abdul staring at the screen with wide, unblinking eyes. The smell of our breakfast had grown faint. Even the tea had gone cold.

"Not yet," I said finally, steadying my voice. "We wait. We watch. No rushing into anything blind. Tonight, we'll decide."

The day dragged like a shadow. Each hour brought a new report, each more chilling than the last. Videos flooded social media—some real, most fake—but all feeding the same fear. Witnesses claimed the creature's shadow stretched unnaturally long beneath the streetlights, as if it carried the darkness with it. Some swore they heard chains clinking as it moved, though nothing could be seen binding it.

By afternoon, Pakistan buzzed with rumor. Every tea stall, every market, every phone conversation carried the same name in fearful whispers.

The Hellhound.

Some said it was a djinn, bound in animal form by ancient wrath. Others claimed it was a cursed guardian of the underworld,

unleashed by sin. A few swore it was an omen of death—that wherever it appeared, tragedy soon followed.

Evening came wrapped in unease. The golden light faded, and a cold mist began to creep through the streets. We gathered inside Peter's sitting room, the glow of the television flickering across our faces. The news anchors spoke in hushed tones now; even their polished professionalism faltered when the next video aired—a shot of the empty streets of Gharo, lined with shuttered shops and police vans, their lights flashing uselessly in the fog.

Abdul spread the morning's newspapers across the table. Headlines screamed panic:

"Terror in Sindh – Locals Flee After Night of Screams."

"Authorities Baffled by 'Beast' – No Tracks Found."

Peter poured himself a glass of water, his hand unsteady. "This is madness," he muttered. "No animal could do this and vanish without a trace."

Amit was scrolling through his laptop, his eyes darting over every blurry video. "Look here," he said. "Every witness describes the same thing—size of a lion, shape of a dog, eyes like burning coal. Always near water, always at night."

Diljeet swallowed hard. "Like it's hunting."

I leaned forward, my heart heavy. "No. Not hunting. Watching. Judging."

They looked at me, waiting. The weight of understanding settled in my chest like stone. "This isn't some beast. It's a manifestation—a spirit of vengeance, born of fire and shadow. Everything fits. What they saw in Gharo..." I exhaled slowly. "It's the Hellhound."

The words hung in the air, cold and final. The kind of silence that follows a verdict.

Outside, the wind began to rise, rustling through the neem branches. The power flickered once, twice, then steadied. The faint smell of smoke drifted in from somewhere distant, and in that moment, we all knew—the peace we had tasted in Sialkot was over.

Our laughter, our warmth, our holiday—all had been only a pause. The world beyond had waited patiently for us to rest, to breathe, to believe in peace again. And now, as night deepened and the shadows stretched long across the courtyard, the next chapter of our haunting had already begun.

Gharo the Gateway to the Delta

The room was dim except for the golden hue spilling from the antique chandelier that swung gently above us, casting restless shadows upon the walls. We sat gathered around the map like pilgrims before an altar, each of us aware that what we were about to undertake would once again pull us from comfort into chaos. The clock on the far wall ticked with deliberate precision, its rhythmic click a reminder that time itself waited for no one—not even those foolish enough to chase the supernatural. Peter's eyes gleamed as he leaned over the map, his finger following the crimson thread of the highway that cut across Pakistan's spine—from Sialkot's misty heartlands, past the bustling veins of Lahore and Multan, down to Sindh's dry breath and coastal winds. "This," he murmured, tapping Gharo's name with quiet conviction, "is where the whispers end—or where they begin again." His tone carried a mixture of thrill and foreboding. The rest of us exchanged uncertain glances. We had faced darkness before, but this felt different—heavier, like something ancient had stirred from slumber. Abdul's laptop pinged softly, pulling our attention to the screen. Rows of tabs gleamed in the dim light, displaying satellite images, historical maps, and recent news clippings. He scrolled slowly, his expression grim. "The reports are consistent," he said. "Multiple witnesses from Shams Society claim to have seen the creature more than once. Always between midnight and three in the morning. Always near the edge of the fields that border the society." "That's where the mangroves start, right?" Amit asked, leaning closer. Abdul nodded. "Exactly. The area where the land fades into the delta. Hard to access. Perfect place to hide—if it's hiding at all." The words hung between us like smoke. Outside, the Sialkot night had grown colder. The wind rattled the windowpanes, and the soft scent of burnt wood from nearby houses drifted into the room. It was strange how quickly warmth could turn to unease. Just days ago, this same house had echoed with our laughter, with the clinking of cups and playful arguments over cricket scores. Now, it was filled with the quiet hum of research, the rustle of maps, and the unspoken weight of purpose. Peter rose, pacing near the window. "If we leave tomorrow, we can reach Karachi by noon," he said. "We'll regroup at your place, Adeel, then drive straight to Gharo the next

morning.” His eyes met mine, a spark of determination lighting the weariness there. “We’ll do it the old way—methodical, prepared, and cautious. No rushing in blind.” I nodded. That had always been our rule. The unseen was not to be underestimated. We had learned that lesson the hard way, in the deserts of Balochistan and the ruins of Kalabagh, where arrogance nearly cost us more than just courage. Abdul’s fingers danced over the keyboard again. “Gharo’s not a large town,” he said, reading aloud from a travel blog. “Population just over twenty-five thousand. Farming, fishing, small trade. But there’s something odd—people mention sudden weather shifts. Unusual fog rolling in off the delta.” He paused, his brows furrowing. “Fog that sometimes glows faintly red.” “Red fog?” Diljeet scoffed lightly, but even his attempt at humor faltered. “Sounds like another fisherman’s tale.” “Maybe,” Abdul said softly, “or maybe not.” Silence crept back into the room, heavy as the December night pressing against the windows. In that silence, the map between us seemed to breathe. The blue veins of rivers, the pale lines of roads—all leading south, all converging toward that single dot that now carried so much weight: Gharo. It wasn’t merely a place anymore. It was a question waiting to be answered. As the hour grew late, we began to prepare. Suitcases opened, filled with essentials—torches, cameras, notebooks, and our old field gear. Each item held a memory of battles fought against the unseen. My hands lingered over my worn leather journal, its pages filled with sketches, symbols, and observations from years past. Somewhere in those notes, I hoped, would lie something that could help us make sense of what awaited. The night passed quietly, each of us lost in thought. The wind howled intermittently through the courtyard, stirring the marigolds Peter’s mother had planted near the old well. Their bright orange petals glowed faintly under the moonlight, a small defiance against the chill. I stood by the window for a long while, watching the city sleep. Somewhere beyond those distant lights, Gharo waited—unaware, or perhaps fully aware, of the travelers it had summoned. The next morning dawned pale and misty. The streets of Sialkot shimmered under a thin veil of fog as rickshaws honked and tea stalls opened one by one. We loaded our bags into the taxi bound for the airport, Rosy’s keys clinking in Peter’s hand like a promise yet to be fulfilled. “One last breakfast before we go?” Amit asked as he passed me a cup of steaming chai. “You’ll miss this once we hit Karachi.” “You’re assuming Karachi

will let us eat in peace," I replied with a faint smile. The flight to Karachi was uneventful, yet silence clung to us. Even Diljeet, the usual source of banter and laughter, sat quietly by the window, watching the landscape change beneath the plane—the rolling greens of Punjab fading into the sunbaked plains of Sindh. When we landed, the air was thicker, warmer, laced with the salt of the Arabian Sea. Karachi's chaos greeted us like an old friend—horns blaring, vendors shouting, the rhythm of a city that never paused. We spent the evening at my home, repacking, refining our plan, and resting what nerves we could. Outside, the city buzzed with life, oblivious to the storm that brewed just miles away. That night, long after the others had drifted into uneasy sleep, I sat alone in the veranda. The air smelled of the sea, and somewhere in the distance, a dog howled—low, drawn-out, mournful. It shouldn't have unnerved me, but it did. I looked up at the sky, at the faint glimmer of stars struggling through Karachi's haze, and felt the same old truth settle into my bones: peace was always the calm before the storm. Morning arrived wrapped in gold and dust. The sound of Rosy's engine filled the air as Peter turned the key, the familiar growl awakening like a loyal beast. The jeep's metal gleamed in the early light, carrying the scars of journeys past. We loaded our supplies—food, tools, spare fuel—and climbed in. "Ready?" Peter called out. "As ready as we ever are," Abdul replied, shutting his laptop and tossing it into the backseat. With that, Rosy rolled forward, her tires crunching over the gravel as we pulled out into the open road. The highway stretched before us like an endless ribbon of fate. The world outside blurred—villages, fields, and the occasional shrine flashing by in waves of dust and sunlight. The farther we drove from Karachi, the quieter the landscape grew, until the only sounds were the steady hum of the engine and the wind rushing past. "You think it's really a Hellhound?" Amit finally asked, breaking the silence. His voice was calm, but his eyes searched the horizon as though expecting an answer from it. "If it is," I said slowly, "we'll know soon enough." Peter's hands tightened on the steering wheel. "Whatever it is, it's waiting. And so are we." The words fell like a vow, swallowed by the hum of the engine. Ahead of us, the road curved toward Gharo—a town of fishermen, fields, and winds. But somewhere beyond those peaceful façades, something stirred that did not belong to this world. And as Rosy sped onward, the clouds above began to thicken, turning the

sky the color of ash. It was as if even the heavens knew: our holiday had ended, and the hunt had begun.

Whispers of the Hound Through Time

The afternoon stretched into a soft, amber haze, and for a while, the rhythm of life in the house seemed unhurried again. The scent of chai and fried spices clung to the air long after the plates had been cleared, mingling with the faint hum of distant traffic outside. The warm domesticity of the moment—the quiet rustle of pages, the crackle of the kettle reheating on the stove—felt almost out of place given what we were discussing. Yet perhaps that contrast was what made it all the more haunting.

Abdul leaned back in his chair, his eyes fixed on nothing in particular. “It’s strange,” he murmured. “How every faith—every civilization—seems to have known this creature. Guard, monster, omen... all the same being, seen through different eyes.”

Peter nodded, setting his Bible gently aside. The golden light of sunset brushed against his face, deepening the shadows beneath his eyes. “Maybe that’s the point,” he said softly. “That truth never wears one face. It’s what lies behind it that matters.”

His words hung in the air like dust motes caught in the fading sunlight. None of us spoke immediately. We were used to mystery—to the way darkness wore masks, to the way faith and fear sometimes touched hands—but this felt deeper, older. It was as if we were not uncovering something new but remembering something forgotten.

Amit broke the silence first, flipping open his notebook. “The Greeks had Cerberus, yes,” he said, “but there’s something else. In ancient Egypt, the god Anubis was also a guardian of the dead—a jackal-headed deity who guided souls to the afterlife.”

He turned the notebook so we could see his sketch: a sleek, dark figure with long ears and piercing eyes. “Look at the pattern,” he said. “Everywhere, the hound is tied to death, but not always as an agent of evil. Sometimes as a guide. A boundary keeper.”

I nodded slowly. “A being that guards thresholds—the space between life and death, between the physical and the unseen.”

The phrase “between worlds” seemed to strike a chord with all of us. Abdul looked up from his notes. “That’s exactly what Gharo is,” he said. “A place between. Between river and sea, land and delta, the living and—whatever else walks those marshes at night.”

The air in the room shifted then, subtly but unmistakably. It was

as though the mere acknowledgment of that idea had called something closer. The wind outside began to rise, whistling faintly through the narrow gap beneath the old wooden door. The lights flickered once, then steadied.

Peter stood and moved to close the window, his movements deliberate, almost wary. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” he said lightly, though his voice lacked its usual ease. “We’re dealing with reports, not prophecies.”

But none of us believed that entirely.

When he sat down again, his chair groaned softly under him, the sound echoing in the quiet room. The sky outside had deepened to a muted indigo, and the faint calls of the maghrib azaan drifted through the open courtyard. The world outside continued its rituals, but ours was different—a kind of vigil of the mind and spirit.

Abdul refilled our cups with tea, the steam curling upward like thin fingers of smoke. “If this creature,” he said thoughtfully, “is connected to the legends we’ve discussed, it may not be random. There’s always a reason spirits appear when and where they do.”

“An unfinished task,” I added, “or a boundary disturbed.”

He nodded. “Exactly. The Hellhound, if that’s what it is, could be guarding something—or someone. It might not even be the threat people think it is.”

“Unless,” Peter said quietly, “it’s been provoked.”

No one answered. The only sound was the steady ticking of the clock above the mantel, each second carving its own small wound into the silence.

Outside, a gust of wind sent the marigold petals scattering across the courtyard tiles, their golden fragments swirling in circles before vanishing into the dusk. I watched them from my seat, a strange unease growing in me. The scene was beautiful, almost poetic, yet there was something in it that felt like an omen.

The evening deepened, and the conversation returned to our preparations. Abdul pulled up the topographic maps of Gharo, marking the coordinates of Shams Society and its surrounding fields. “This is where the sightings are most frequent,” he said, pointing to a cluster of red pins on the screen. “Near the boundary of the old fields and the mangrove belt. Hard terrain. Sparse population after dark.”

Amit leaned over the laptop. “That makes sense. If the creature’s truly large—or if it moves between worlds—it would need space.

Isolation."

Peter exhaled slowly, rubbing his temple. "And we'll be walking right into that isolation."

"We've done worse," Diljeet said, though the bravado in his tone rang slightly hollow. He looked at the rest of us, his grin fading into sincerity. "We just need to remember why we do this. To understand. To bring peace."

His words grounded us. The truth was, we were not hunters. We never had been. We sought not to destroy but to comprehend—to bridge the chasm between fear and faith.

Night fell fully then, swallowing the last traces of gold from the sky. The temperature dropped, and Abdul's mother brought us woolen shawls to guard against the chill. We sat wrapped in them, the glow of the study lamp illuminating our circle while the rest of the house drifted into darkness.

The discussion slowed, turning contemplative. Peter tapped his finger against the open Bible. "You know," he said softly, "in every story—every faith—the hound never chooses its post. It is bound to it. Maybe that's what we're missing. Maybe this creature is not the curse—but the cursed."

The thought sent a ripple through us. Abdul's brow furrowed, and Amit's pen stilled over his notes. I felt the weight of the idea settle deep within me, as though it carried a truth too vast for words.

"What if," I said after a moment, "this Hellhound was once human? Or once bound to something human?"

Peter gave a slow, grave nod. "Then it's not just the beast we'll be facing in Gharo. It's the story behind it."

The air felt heavier after that. Even the flame of the lamp seemed to burn lower, as though the room itself wished to eavesdrop. Beyond the walls, the city murmured in the distance, the faint sound of a rickshaw bell mingling with the sigh of the night wind.

We decided to rest early, though sleep did not come easily. As I lay on the sofa, listening to the rhythmic breathing of my friends, my thoughts wandered to the verses we had read—the dog of the cave, the psalmist's cry for deliverance, the guardian of the underworld. Each one different, yet connected by some invisible thread.

Somewhere in the dark between waking and sleep, I thought I

heard it again—the low, mournful howl of a dog, distant but distinct. It rose once, then faded into silence. I told myself it was just the wind, a trick of the restless Sindh breeze creeping through Sialkot. Yet my heart beat faster all the same.

Morning would come soon, and with it, the journey to Gharo—the place between worlds. But that night, as the wind whispered through the house and the marigolds outside swayed under the moonlight, I could not help but feel that the hound—whatever it was—had already begun to watch us.

It was not yet an enemy. But neither was it far away.

A Night of Resolution

As the night drew closer, the sky outside shifted into shades of violet and gold, before finally surrendering to the calm darkness of evening. The fading light spilled through the windows in soft bands, brushing over the scattered books and folded maps like a final benediction. We were all weary from the endless hours of research, yet there was an undeniable warmth in the air—a sense of quiet satisfaction that we had made progress, even if our final plans still lingered in uncertainty. For once, it felt right to stop thinking, to let the silence between us speak louder than the questions we had yet to answer.

By silent agreement, we chose not to press our discussions further that night. Instead, we resolved to live in the moment and postpone our strategies until the next day. The room that had, only hours earlier, been a battlefield of ideas and theories now seemed softer, almost forgiving. Books were closed, pens capped, and papers stacked into uneven piles that bore the mark of honest effort.

Dinner was soon prepared, and the dining table filled with fragrances that wrapped around us like comforting arms. Platters of steaming biryani, golden with saffron, were placed at the center. The grains shimmered under the warm light, releasing waves of cardamom and cinnamon with each passing breeze. Skewers of seekh kebabs, their spices releasing smoky aromas, sizzled as they were served hot, the juices crackling faintly as they hit the cool plates. Fresh naan arrived straight from the tandoor, its charred edges crisp while the insides remained soft and pillowy. Alongside these delights sat bowls of creamy raita sprinkled with mint, and chilled glasses of sweet lassi to soothe the heat of the spices.

We ate as though we hadn’t tasted food in days, laughter punctuating every mouthful. Abdul teased Peter for piling his plate as if tomorrow’s meals would vanish. “Save some for the rest of us, lionheart,” he said, chuckling as Peter pretended not to hear. Amit, always quick with mischief, challenged Diljeet to eat more chilies, and the latter, brave as ever, accepted with a grin that quickly twisted into regret. His face turned crimson as the spice hit him, and Peter nearly choked with laughter, pounding the table as he gasped for air. I could not help but laugh until tears blurred my vision.

The heavy tension of the day melted away under the warmth of good food and better company. Even the walls of Abdul's ancestral home seemed to join in our joy, echoing faint laughter through the corridors. The air carried that rare, fleeting sense of belonging—a feeling that only comes when people who have walked through darkness together finally share a moment of light.

By the time our stomachs were full, we leaned back in our chairs, each of us groaning with satisfaction. The table, once abundant, now bore only traces of our feast—empty plates, scattered crumbs, and bowls with just enough left to tempt another bite. The kitchen staff moved quietly in the background, clearing dishes with polite smiles, while we lingered in our seats, reluctant to let the evening end.

The night air beckoned us to step outside, and we obliged. Together we strolled into the quiet streets, where the lamps cast long shadows and the cool breeze carried faint hints of the sea from faraway Karachi. The faint rustle of neem trees lined the lane, and the world beyond seemed to hum softly, as if whispering its own lullaby. The silence of the town wrapped around us, broken only by the rhythmic sound of our footsteps and the occasional bark of a stray dog in the distance.

We spoke little during that walk. It was as though each of us knew that our minds needed rest, not more questions. Words would have spoiled the serenity of that hour. The stars above shimmered like watchful eyes, scattered across a velvet sky, and the crescent moon followed us as a silent companion. The air carried a light chill, enough to make us pull our jackets tighter, yet it felt soothing —like the earth itself was breathing peace after a long day.

For those brief moments, we allowed ourselves the luxury of being ordinary travelers—just friends, walking together, savoring the night without fear of the mysteries waiting in Gharo. There was no talk of hounds or legends, no mention of scriptures or spirits—only the comfort of knowing that we were not alone in our journey. Abdul pointed out the constellations above us, naming them one by one in a soft, nostalgic tone. Peter hummed a tune from his childhood, something faintly familiar, and Diljeet joined in, adding a rhythm with his hands as he clapped softly in time.

When we returned home, the fatigue of the day finally crashed upon us. The weight of maps, scriptures, and speculation had drained every ounce of our strength. Abdul was the first to yawn,

Peter followed soon after, and within minutes we were all retreating to our rooms. As we walked through the hallway, the sound of our footsteps seemed to grow softer with each passing moment, until even the creaking floorboards decided to rest.

My room welcomed me with the faint scent of sandalwood and the quiet hum of the ceiling fan. The air was cool, and the moonlight that slipped through the half-drawn curtains painted pale lines across the floor. I set my notes aside, placing them carefully on the desk, and then sank into bed. The sheets were crisp, the pillow soft—small details that felt almost sacred after a long day of thought and conversation.

Through the open window, I could hear the distant murmur of crickets and the occasional sigh of the wind moving through the trees. Somewhere far away, a motorcycle passed, its sound fading quickly into the night. The world outside felt vast and endless, yet strangely comforting. In that stillness, I realized how rare such peace was in our lives. We spent so much time chasing answers, seeking out the unknown, that moments like this—simple, human, and quiet—became treasures in themselves.

The ceiling fan continued its steady rhythm, and the curtains swayed gently, whispering secrets only the night could understand. I closed my eyes, letting my thoughts drift lazily through fragments of the day—the laughter at the table, the warmth of the food, the calm of our walk, the look of contentment on each of my friends' faces. Each image folded softly into the next until they blurred into something dreamlike, something serene.

For the first time that day, my mind was quiet, free from questions and shadows. Tomorrow would bring new decisions, perhaps even dangers. But that night, exhaustion was our only companion, and in its arms, we surrendered without resistance.

As sleep began to claim me, I caught one last sound—the gentle call of a night bird somewhere beyond the courtyard. It sang a short, plaintive note and then fell silent, as if it too had drifted into dreams. The house settled deeper into stillness. Every creak, every distant sound faded until there was nothing left but the slow, even rhythm of breathing, the shared heartbeat of a night at peace.

The darkness felt kind, almost tender. It cradled us in its quiet certainty, keeping the questions of the world at bay until morning. Somewhere beyond that stillness, the mysteries of Gharo waited—patient and silent—but for now, they were nothing more than

whispers behind closed doors.

And as I finally slipped into sleep, I thought to myself that perhaps peace was not found in answers at all, but in moments like these—in laughter, in friendship, in the soft silence between words.

That night, beneath the moonlit sky of Hyderabad, five weary souls slept not as seekers of the unknown, but as brothers bound by faith, memory, and the fragile, beautiful calm before the storm.

Flight into the City of Lights

The next morning, we all woke up at exactly eight o'clock. The soft winter light filtered through the curtains, painting the walls in pale gold. The air carried a cool freshness, tinged with the faint scent of dew and the distant murmur of street sounds awakening beyond the gates. After refreshing showers and clean clothes, we gathered at the breakfast table. What awaited us was nothing short of heavenly—a platter of buttery parathas, golden and crisp on the edges, paired with spicy omelets that filled the air with their sizzling aroma. Alongside, steaming cups of doodh-patti tea spread their fragrance like a warm embrace. Every bite felt like it carried the flavor of comfort and energy for the journey ahead. By the time we finished, our stomachs were satisfied, and our spirits were soaring.

The sunlight outside shimmered with promise. Abdul, ever the planner, checked our bags twice, ensuring nothing essential was left behind—our maps, notes, and the protective charms each of us carried out of habit. Peter adjusted his camera strap while Amit tested the batteries for the EMF meters. The familiar rhythm of preparation settled over us, a comforting reminder that whatever awaited us, we were moving with purpose.

Excitement pulsed through us as we prepared for our trip to Karachi—the beating heart of Pakistan. The very name of the city carried a thrill: a place where the sea met the sky, where dreams and history walked hand in hand. Karachi was not just vast in its reach but alive in its rhythm, with its shimmering coastline, bustling bazaars, and unforgettable mixture of cultures. For us, it wasn't just another city; it was a channel towards the destination of mysteries waiting to be uncovered.

The house buzzed with quiet energy as we moved through the final preparations. Abdul packed the portable chargers; Diljeet double-checked our documents; I made sure our equipment cases were securely locked. Everything seemed to move with a natural harmony born of experience. Over the years, we had learned how to read one another's silences—how a single nod or half-smile was enough to say, *we're ready*.

Equipped with all our ghost-hunting gear—EMF meters, thermal cameras, and night vision devices—we decided to purchase extra EVP voice recorders, knowing the area we were heading to was

expansive. The air felt cooler as we stepped outside, the crisp wind brushing against our faces like an omen of movement. Once ready, we set out for Sialkot Airport.

The drive there was a blur of fields and villages, each scene passing by in rhythmic harmony—the sun rising higher, children walking to school, the distant echo of prayer calls lingering faintly in the morning air. Abdul hummed an old tune as he drove, his fingers tapping lightly on the steering wheel. There was a serenity in those hours, a sense that fate was guiding us toward something inevitable, even if we didn't yet know its shape.

The sky hung heavy with clouds, and because of the weather, very few travelers had booked their seats. Luck favored us—we managed to secure five without any difficulty. Inside the airport checking room, we presented our documents. The officers moved with their usual precision, stamping forms, scanning bags, exchanging polite greetings. The custom officer gave a passing glance at our gadgets but raised no objection. After all, I was closely connected with government agencies, and Diljeet, being a commissioner, only added weight to our credibility.

We explained we were headed to Gharo Society to help its people, and the officer allowed us through without delay. He even offered a small smile before waving us on, perhaps sensing our sincerity. Two hours melted away like minutes as we waited for the boarding call. We spent the time sipping coffee from paper cups and joking about who would fall asleep first during the flight. Even amid the hum of announcements and rolling suitcases, our laughter stood out—gentle, unhurried, the kind that belongs only to old friends on familiar roads.

Soon, we found ourselves seated inside the plane, excitement humming in our veins. The engines roared, and with a surge, the aircraft lifted from the ground, carrying us toward Karachi. The ascent pressed us gently into our seats, and below, the land stretched like a patchwork quilt of green and gold. Clouds gathered in slow, lazy drifts, and sunlight spilled across the wings in molten hues. Peter pointed out shapes in the clouds—animals, castles, faces—while Abdul simply smiled, his eyes half-closed, savoring the quiet hum of flight.

The two-hour journey passed almost too quickly. Around midday, the air hostesses served us a delightful lunch—soft naan bread, succulent chicken curry seasoned with rich spices, and

chilled mango juice that burst with sweetness. The meal filled us with comfort as the plane descended toward the city that awaited us. The faint scent of jet fuel mingled with the aroma of spices, creating an oddly nostalgic feeling—the familiar intersection of travel and anticipation.

When the wheels finally kissed the Karachi runway, the sun above was blazing, pouring down like liquid fire upon the tarmac. Through the cabin windows, we saw the city stretching endlessly—a maze of roads, rooftops, and glimmering sea in the far distance. As we disembarked, a gust of warm coastal air rushed to meet us, carrying with it the scent of salt and dust, life and movement.

Outside the terminal, the city greeted us with its usual chaos: the cry of vendors selling tea and snacks, the blaring horns of taxis competing for attention, the distant hum of conversation that never seemed to end. It was Karachi in all its glory—raw, restless, and alive.

A cab was hailed from the stand, and before long, we were driving through the veins of the city. Towering billboards loomed overhead, flashing advertisements that seemed almost alive in the sunlight. Rickshaws darted like bright-colored insects between lanes, buses roared past with painted faces and Urdu verses, and everywhere, humanity moved in a synchronized dance of noise and purpose.

Eventually, we reached my home—a place that stood quietly amid the chaos, an island of calm in a sea of movement. The moment we stepped inside, the cool air wrapped around us like a blessing. We allowed ourselves a few hours of rest. The sound of the city outside faded to a low hum as we stretched out, letting the fatigue of travel slip away.

By evening, fatigue gave way to renewed energy as the aroma of tea drifted through the house. The brew was strong and fragrant, served with cardamom biscuits that melted in the mouth. Each sip felt like liquid gold, restoring our strength after the long journey. The golden light of sunset spilled across the windows, casting gentle reflections on the table where we sat, quietly sipping, too content to speak much.

The city outside continued its rhythm, but inside, time seemed to slow. The air felt softer now, touched with the scent of evening jasmine from the garden. Abdul leaned back with a sigh of satisfaction. “Karachi never changes,” he said with a smile. “It’s

chaos—but somehow, it feels like home."

We all nodded in agreement. There was something timeless about the city, something that welcomed and unsettled in equal measure. But tonight, we allowed ourselves the comfort of stillness.

Later, I began contacting hotels in Shams Society, Gharo. We needed a place with at least three or four bedrooms that could accommodate us comfortably. The phone lines buzzed with recorded greetings and polite refusals. Some hotels were full, others too expensive, a few too distant from where we needed to be. The process was tiring but necessary. After calling several options, we finally settled on Crescent Hotel.

Not only did it meet our requirements, but it was also surprisingly affordable. That was a blessing—since the length of our stay was uncertain, saving wherever possible was a necessity. The manager's voice over the phone was courteous, promising us quiet rooms, steady electricity, and space to work. It was all we needed. I made the booking, noting down the confirmation details, and leaned back with a quiet sense of relief.

The others looked satisfied too. Plans were falling into place, each step leading us closer to the heart of what awaited in Gharo. Outside, the first stars began to pierce the Karachi sky, their faint light flickering through the city's haze.

Dinner that night was simple—grilled fish, rice, and salad—but it carried a kind of peace that words couldn't describe. As we ate, the conversation turned light—stories from old trips, memories of near-disasters that were now only funny. Laughter filled the room again, easy and unforced, wrapping the day in warmth.

When the plates were cleared and the lights dimmed, we sat by the window for a while, watching the city lights shimmer like stars fallen to earth. The sea breeze whispered faintly through the curtains, carrying the scent of salt and life.

Tomorrow, we would leave for Gharo—the place where our questions waited. But for that night, the world outside could spin as it pleased. Inside, among friends, there was peace.

And in that peace, we slept soundly, unaware that the calm we cherished would soon become a memory—a prelude to something far greater than we could imagine.

Travel towards the Haunted Society

On the very next morning, our alarms rang at exactly seven o'clock. The golden rays of the Karachi sun streamed through the curtains as we stirred from our beds. The air carried the faint hum of the city awakening—vendors calling from distant lanes, a milkman's bicycle bell ringing, and the soft rustle of sea breeze filtering through the windows. After refreshing showers, we gathered once again around the breakfast table. What awaited us was a feast fit for travelers—a spread of piping hot halwa-puri, crisp on the outside and soft within, served with spicy chickpea curry that tingled the taste buds. Fresh lassi, thick and creamy, was poured into tall glasses, cooling our throats with every sip. The taste of breakfast was rich with energy and warmth, preparing us for the long road that stretched ahead. Every bite seemed to whisper encouragement: *Today begins your real adventure.*

There was a quiet excitement beneath our calm—an unspoken current of anticipation. Yet, this journey was not just about food and comfort. Caution walked hand in hand with thrill. The route to Gharo was infamous, a road wrapped in both mystery and menace. Travelers spoke of robberies and strange disappearances, stories passed from one driver to another at roadside dhabas. We decided not to take chances. Our licensed guns—polished and loaded—were packed carefully, resting in their leather cases like silent guardians. For us, ghost hunters, this was a different kind of haunting: not the unseen, but the very real threat of men lurking behind the dunes. The thought sent a chill down our spines, but it also sharpened our focus. Fear, after all, is the shadow of courage.

We packed with meticulous care. Into our bags went packets of dry fruits—almonds, cashews, raisins—small yet sustaining companions for the long ride. Bottled water, tin cans of fruit juice, and a few energy bars were neatly stacked beside the equipment. Every item had its place, every purpose considered. My faithful Rosy Jeep stood gleaming in the sunlight, its metal catching the morning glow like armor. It had carried us through countless missions before, from mountain trails to forgotten ruins, and now it seemed almost eager to roar into motion again. When the engine started, its deep growl filled the driveway, strong and reassuring—a sound that promised endurance.

With the city slowly waking up behind us, we turned onto the National Highway. The road stretched out before us like a gray

ribbon winding toward the horizon. For a while, the urban world clung to our sides—billboards towering above, buses groaning past, and the occasional scent of freshly brewed chai drifting from roadside stalls. But soon, the buildings thinned and gave way to the open plains. The landscape transformed into a canvas of muted browns and golds, where scattered shrubs and twisted trees stood like sentinels of the desert. The hum of the Jeep blended with the rhythm of the wind, and for a time, the silence of the world felt vast, almost sacred.

At every checkpoint we crossed, armed guards stood under the harsh sun, their faces weathered but alert. They peered into our vehicle, their eyes catching the glint of metal equipment, but when they saw the permits and our official connections, their suspicion turned into polite nods. The barriers lifted, and we moved on—each checkpoint marking a transition from safety to solitude.

The deeper we drove, the more the world seemed to dissolve into its own stillness. The road ahead rippled in the heat, mirage-like, while the horizon shimmered in pale blue haze. From time to time, the wind carried faint whispers—the soft rattle of sand against metal, the distant call of unseen birds. The rhythm of the wheels became hypnotic, steady and sure. Then came the trucks—massive, growling beasts painted in dazzling colors, with verses of poetry and prayers sprawled across their backs. They thundered past us, shaking the air, leaving trails of dust that shimmered in sunlight like smoke.

Somewhere along the way, we slowed down as a herd of camels crossed the highway. Their tall, swaying forms moved with unhurried grace, their shadows stretching long across the sand. The sight was oddly serene—ancient and timeless, as though we had stepped into a page from history. It was in that stillness that I felt a strange mix of awe and humility. This land, vast and silent, seemed to hold memories older than we could ever imagine.

But tranquility was short-lived. Not long after, as we approached a desolate stretch bordered by low dunes, the sound of engines broke the quiet. Two motorcycles appeared from behind the rise, speeding toward us in parallel lines. The riders wore scarves over their faces, their eyes glinting like shards of glass. A sudden tension filled the air. I tightened my grip on the steering wheel, my pulse quickening. Diljeet's hand instinctively moved toward his rifle, and the others sat up straight, alert and silent. The riders drew closer,

matching our speed, their engines growling like predators circling prey.

For several long seconds, it felt like the world had narrowed to that moment—the Jeep's roaring engine, the thundering bikes, the stretch of empty road between us. I pressed harder on the accelerator, the tires gripping the asphalt with a screech. The distance widened, and after a tense pause, the riders veered off, turning sharply toward the dunes. Perhaps they recognized our resolve, or perhaps they saw the warning in our eyes. Either way, they disappeared as suddenly as they had come, swallowed by the golden dust of the desert.

A long breath escaped our lips in unison. No words were spoken; none were needed. The silence that followed carried both relief and a renewed respect for the road we had chosen. Sometimes, danger didn't announce itself—it simply passed like a shadow, reminding you of your fragility.

As we moved forward, the landscape began to shift again. The barren sands gave way to stretches of greenery, where palm trees swayed gently and water shimmered in the distance. We soon reached the Dhabeji check post. The soldiers there gave us curious looks, perhaps wondering why a group like ours was traveling with such unusual equipment. But when we explained briefly, their expressions softened into smiles, and they waved us through with friendly nods.

Beyond Dhabeji lay the shimmering expanse of Gharo Creek. The sunlight danced across the water, turning it into sheets of molten gold. The salty wind from the sea carried a tang that stung our lips but filled us with invigoration. The air itself seemed to shift —thicker, quieter, almost humming with an energy that we couldn't quite name. Every curve of the road, every gust of breeze, whispered that we were crossing into a place where stories lived and lingered.

Hours slipped by, measured not by the clock but by the steady rhythm of wheels on road. The laughter between us came easily now, mingling with moments of thoughtful silence. Beneath all our light talk, however, ran an unspoken awareness: this journey was not merely a physical passage. It was a threshold—a slow unfolding of destiny. Fate had marked this road long before we set upon it.

When the first signboard of *Gharo Shams Society* came into view, a quiet thrill passed through the group. The letters gleamed in the

afternoon sun, welcoming us to a place that existed half in reality and half in legend. The sun hung high above, its light mellowing into gold. It was now time to find Crescent Hotel, our chosen refuge. Without wasting a moment, I called the hotel manager. His voice was cheerful, reassuring, and filled with practiced hospitality. He sent me a location pin on WhatsApp, along with a brief message: *"Follow the road past the old windmill—you'll see the hotel before the next turn."*

Following his guidance, we steered the Jeep through narrow lanes lined with low brick walls and scattered palm groves. The road twisted and turned, each bend revealing glimpses of small villages, grazing animals, and children waving curiously at our passing vehicle. After about forty-five minutes, the sight we had waited for finally appeared—the tall sign of *Crescent Hotel,* its bold letters framed against the backdrop of fading sunlight.

The hotel stood with quiet dignity, its white façade gleaming like pearl. At the entrance, the staff greeted us with practiced smiles and polite bows. The manager, a stout man with sharp yet kind eyes, welcomed us warmly, assuring that our rooms had been prepared in advance. His tone carried the confidence of someone who had seen all kinds of guests—tourists, explorers, and perhaps even seekers like us. Within minutes, our luggage was being carried upstairs by uniformed attendants whose shoes clicked softly against the polished marble floor.

Since we had already paid via credit card, the check-in was seamless. Fatigue now settled heavily in our bones. Each of us retreated briefly to our rooms, where warm showers washed away the dust of the road, leaving behind a sense of renewal. The water's gentle heat felt like a balm, easing every ache, every trace of tension.

By the time we gathered again in the dining hall, the sky outside had turned amber, and the first lights of evening flickered through the curtains. The air inside was fragrant with spices—cumin, saffron, and roasted garlic. Lunch awaited us like a reward: steaming plates of biryani layered with tender meat and golden rice, kebabs glistening with oil, mint chutney cool and fresh, and crisp salads that added color to the table. Dessert came last—kheer sprinkled with slivers of pistachio, its sweetness lingering long after the final spoonful.

For a few moments, conversation faded into quiet satisfaction.

The world outside could wait; within those walls, there was only warmth, laughter, and the simple joy of being together after a long journey.

And yet, as the evening deepened and the soft hum of distant chatter filled the dining hall, a shared thought flickered among us. Beyond the safety of the hotel's glowing lights, the real purpose of our journey awaited. We did not speak it aloud, but our eyes met across the table, carrying the same message: tonight, our adventure would truly begin.

In Pursuit of Shadows

The hotel clock struck 9:00 p.m. sharp, its chime echoing faintly through the corridors of the Crescent Hotel like a warning bell. The sound lingered for a breath too long—like something unseen was listening, waiting, absorbing its vibration. Outside, the sea roared against the jagged rocks, not with rhythm, but with restlessness. Each crash against the shore seemed to whisper of unease, as though the ocean itself knew that this night would not be an ordinary one.

Inside, the dining hall gleamed beneath amber chandeliers. The air shimmered with the fragrance of salt, spice, and smoke. The hotel staff had prepared a feast that could tempt even the most burdened soul: steaming bowls of prawn curry glowed a deep, molten red; golden-fried snapper, crisp to the touch, exhaled trails of savory steam; lobsters roasted in garlic butter gleamed like molten copper; and the spiced crabs—fiery and fragrant—filled the hall with an aroma that seemed to sting the eyes and awaken the nerves. The table, long and polished, reflected the flickering flames of the candles placed upon it, and for a fleeting moment, those flames looked alive—dancing shadows that moved with intent.

We took our seats, weary yet restless. Hunger and silence mingled like uneasy companions. As the first morsel touched my tongue, the warmth of the food spread through me like a slow, grounding spell. The prawn cracked open beneath my fingers, its shell yielding with a hiss, releasing a rush of fragrant steam that rose toward my face. The lobster melted in my mouth, buttery and rich, but beneath the comfort, there lingered an odd bitterness—perhaps not from the food, but from the thought that this could be our last meal before we faced what lay beyond the safety of these walls.

No one spoke much. The room was filled only with the sound of cutlery against porcelain and the low, steady hum of the ceiling fans turning above us. Each of us ate as if silence was a condition of strength—as if words might shatter the fragile calm we had built around ourselves. The faint reflection of the chandelier lights wavered in our glasses of water, trembling with every vibration of the sea breeze that pressed faintly against the windows.

Abdul was the first to break the silence, his voice low and edged

with nervous laughter. “Feels like a king’s meal before exile,” he said, trying to lighten the air. But even he knew the humor didn’t quite land. The rest of us smiled, half-heartedly, our eyes betraying the same unspoken thought: the closer we drew to the unknown, the heavier the weight of reality became.

When the last plate was cleared and only the faint aroma of spice and salt remained, we leaned back in our chairs, wordless once more. The air around us seemed thicker somehow, like the hotel itself was holding its breath. Then, as if drawn by an invisible thread, our gazes met across the table. We didn’t need to speak. The decision was there—etched into the stillness. Tonight, we would go.

The lounge awaited us, dimly lit, filled with the faint hum of electricity and the ticking of an antique wall clock. Our gear was spread across the table like a soldier’s arsenal—EMF detectors, EVP recorders, thermal scanners, motion sensors, cameras, and infrared lights. The polished surfaces of our tools caught the light, reflecting faint red glows that looked almost like pulsing hearts. One by one, we checked them, our fingers moving with the automatic precision of ritual. Each device emitted its own quiet sound: a beep, a hum, a click. These noises—so familiar, so mechanical—were strangely reassuring, reminders that even in the world of the unseen, we still had instruments to rely upon.

As I lifted my recorder, the cool metal against my palm felt alive. Its surface was slick, cold, and faintly trembling—as though it anticipated what it might capture. I turned it over in my hand and found my reflection faintly distorted in its screen, my own face unfamiliar, eyes darker than I remembered. The realization sank deep into my bones: we were not merely hunters tonight—we were witnesses stepping into a place where logic would have no meaning.

The faint murmur of voices pulled me back. The hotel manager stood at the doorway, flanked by several members of his staff. Their faces were pale, their eyes wide with something close to terror. The manager’s voice, when he spoke, was steady but hollow.

“You cannot go there,” he said. “That place is cursed. The hound is not... it is not of this world.”

There was a tremor beneath his words, the kind that only comes from having heard things no one wishes to remember. He tried to mask it with authority, but fear cracked through every syllable.

I rose slowly, the floorboards creaking beneath my boots. “Has it harmed anyone?” I asked.

He hesitated—too long. Then shook his head, but the gesture didn't comfort me. His silence had meaning of its own.

"Then why should we fear it?" I pressed gently. "Fear belongs to those who don't understand. We came here to understand."

Peter stepped forward, his tone softer but resolute. "We've seen things that would make most men lose their minds," he said. "And yet here we stand. We won't turn back now."

The manager's eyes darted between us, desperate, pleading. "You think you've seen horror," he whispered. "But you haven't heard *it*—the howl. When it begins, even the waves fall silent. The air stops. It is not the sound of a beast; it is the cry of something that was never meant to exist."

His words crawled into me like ice. For a brief, unguarded moment, I felt the ground shift beneath my resolve. But fear, I reminded myself, was a familiar guest. It could sit with us, whisper in our ears—but it would not lead.

"We will return by dawn," I said simply, brushing past him. His hand twitched as if to stop me, but he let it fall. The staff stepped back, watching as we moved toward the exit, their expressions a silent prayer.

Outside, the world was drenched in moonlight. The hotel's façade glimmered faintly behind us, its windows glowing like watchful eyes. The path ahead was narrow, flanked by wild grass and low shrubs that rustled under the night wind. Each gust carried with it the scent of salt and seaweed—heavy, ancient, almost metallic. The closer we moved to the beach, the louder the waves became. Their roar wasn't constant; it ebbed and surged, almost like breathing. The wind pressed cold fingers against our skin, and the air grew thicker, colder, as if the night itself resisted our presence.

I remember the sound of our footsteps—crunching sand, brushing fabric, faint clicks of metal against zippers and camera straps. No one spoke. Words felt too fragile for a night like this. The only light came from the moon, its glow silver and distant, casting long shadows that stretched and twisted like living things.

And then, the faint glimmer of headlights appeared ahead—unnatural against the otherwise dark landscape. As we neared the beach, our pace slowed, disbelief creeping into our chests. Across the sand, the scene unfolded like a distorted dream. Dozens of police officers stood guard, their flashlights cutting through the mist. Vehicles lined the shore—trucks, jeeps, vans—engines still

humming, headlights slicing the darkness into fractured beams.

It wasn't a beach anymore. It looked like a battlefield preparing for a war against something invisible.

An officer stepped forward, his rifle slung tight, his expression taut with restrained panic. "This area is restricted," he barked. "No civilians allowed. Turn back—now."

Others joined him, voices echoing, blending with the sound of the restless tide. Their orders came sharp, practiced, but beneath the uniform tone lay something else—fear. The kind of fear that erodes authority from the inside.

Diljeet stepped beside me, his calm a contrast to the tension in the air. Without a word, we both reached into our jackets and pulled out our identification cards, the emblems glinting faintly in the moonlight.

I held mine up and said, "Call your DIG. Tell him we're here and that we need a word with him. Immediately."

There was hesitation—a flicker of resistance—but it crumbled under the weight of our certainty. A call was made. Voices exchanged. Static filled the air like soft electricity. Then, the phone was passed to me.

"Sir," I said, steadying my breath, "you know who we are. You know what we've done. We're not here for stories—we're here to end them. Let us proceed."

A pause followed, broken only by the distant crash of waves. Then came the DIG's voice, low, measured, skeptical.

"You expect me to sanction ghost hunts under police protection? Spirits? Hounds? These are tales for frightened villagers, not officers of the state."

I allowed myself a dry, humorless chuckle. "Once, I thought the same. But disbelief doesn't stop the dead from walking, sir. Denial won't keep your men safe. Let us do our job before something worse happens."

The silence stretched—so long that even the waves seemed to wait. When he finally spoke again, his tone had changed.

"Very well. The police will stay hidden. No interference. No gunfire unless absolutely necessary."

"Understood," I replied. "We'll handle the rest."

Slowly, the officers began to retreat. Their footsteps shuffled through sand, their voices low, uncertain. Engines dimmed. Headlights flickered off one by one until only the moon remained,

pale and cold above us. The sudden quiet was almost unbearable. The sea, once roaring, seemed to hush, as if listening.

We stood there, five figures against the vastness of night—alone now, and yet not entirely so. The sand crunched beneath our boots, the devices in our hands blinking faintly like restless eyes. The air pressed heavy around us, thick with salt and silence.

Then came the stillness—the kind that wasn't just absence of sound but the presence of something waiting.

The manager's words came back to me, low and haunting:

"The silence before the howl is where the terror lives."

And in that silence, we felt it—an invisible shift, as though the world had taken one breath too many and was now holding it.

Something, somewhere, was listening.

The Howl That Summoned the Light

We had waited there for almost an hour, the tension weighing down on us like an iron cloak. The policemen stood in silence, their rifles steady in their trembling hands, their eyes darting nervously toward the tree line. The sea murmured behind us, restless and endless, but even its voice seemed subdued, as though nature itself had gone still in reverence—or fear—of what was about to happen.

The night hung heavy and absolute. The air was thick with salt and anticipation, every breath tasting faintly of iron. Even the faintest sounds—the shifting of boots in the sand, the whisper of fabric, the occasional click of a rifle's safety—seemed magnified a hundredfold. Each of us was locked in our own private stillness, counting heartbeats, waiting for something we could not name but knew was coming.

Time stretched and folded in strange ways. An hour passed, maybe more, though it felt like a lifetime pressed into the space between heartbeats. The policemen obeyed their orders—*Do not fire*—but their discipline trembled at the edges. Fear glimmered in their eyes, stark and raw, like the reflection of a dying flame. It wasn't just fear of the unknown; it was the primal terror of realizing that the world you understand might not be the only one that exists.

And then it happened.

The hound raised its monstrous head and let out a howl that cleaved through the night like a blade of sound. It wasn't merely loud—it *shook* the air, vibrated through the bones, and sent a tremor through the ground beneath our feet. The cry rose and fell with an unearthly rhythm, echoing across the dunes and over the sea, until even the waves seemed to falter in their motion. It was not the howl of any earthly creature. It carried with it something ancient, something hollowed out by centuries—a resonance that spoke of places where the living and the dead still shared breath.

The sound lodged itself in my chest. I felt my ribs tighten, my throat close. Every instinct screamed at me to run, yet my body refused to obey. We all stood rooted, transfixed, our eyes drawn toward the shadow that had become the hound.

Its eyes burned—two orbs of molten gold, glowing in the dark like twin embers of judgment. The creature moved with a slow,

deliberate grace, its massive form rippling with power beneath the moonlight. Its breath came out in white clouds, heavy and steady, as it lowered its head to the ground.

It began sniffing—long, deep inhalations that seemed to draw not just scent but *essence* from the earth. Step by step, it moved across the terrain, covering the ground with meticulous purpose. Two thousand square yards, perhaps more, every movement unnervingly precise. It didn't move like an animal—it moved like something performing a ritual. As if tracing lines we could not see, seeking something lost to time.

No one dared to move. Even the wind held its breath. The faint rustle of the waves seemed far away, disconnected, like a sound from another world. I could feel the presence of every man beside me—their fear, their disbelief—pressing close, yet we were all utterly alone in that moment. The only thing that existed was the hound, and the terrible silence between each of its steps.

At last, it stopped. The creature stood perfectly still, its massive body outlined against the silvered sand. Its ears flicked once, as though listening to something beneath the surface. Then, without warning, the ground beneath it began to glow—a faint, ghostly light rising from the earth, pale as moonfire. The glow spread slowly, tracing invisible veins through the soil, and for a moment, the entire area shimmered with an unholy radiance.

And then, in the blink of an eye, the hound stepped into the light and vanished.

No sound. No struggle. Just absence—pure, absolute absence.

A chill rolled through me, slow and suffocating. It wasn't merely fear; it was the knowledge that we had just witnessed something that defied every law of nature. The silence that followed was unbearable. The wind refused to move. Even the ocean seemed stunned into stillness.

I swallowed hard, my throat dry as sand. "Did you see that?" I finally managed, my voice trembling. "Did you really see what just happened?"

The policemen turned toward me, their faces pale, their eyes wide with disbelief. One of them nodded mutely, his rifle clutched so tightly that his knuckles had gone white. There was no doubt in their expressions—only the shared horror of knowing that they had crossed an invisible line, stepped into a world that shouldn't exist.

And yet, in all the terror, there was something else—something

strange. The creature had not tried to harm anyone. Its movements, though terrifying, were deliberate, almost reverent. It had searched, sniffed, and vanished—not as a predator, but as a seeker.

A purpose haunted its every step.

We gathered our wits slowly, as if emerging from a trance. Our work for the night seemed done, yet none of us could shake the weight of what we had seen. As we packed our gear—EVP recorders, night vision cameras, motion sensors—the silence persisted, pressing down like a physical force. Every sound felt intrusive: the snap of a latch, the metallic click of a camera case, the faint rustle of the wind returning after its long stillness.

We decided to review the footage before midnight. Part of us hoped to find an explanation—a trick of the light, a camera malfunction, *anything* that could make the impossible seem ordinary. But in the deepest corners of our minds, we already knew no such comfort would come.

Later that night, huddled in a dimly lit room, we gathered around one of our cameras. The faint green glow of the playback screen filled the space with a sickly hue, casting shadows that looked alive. No one spoke as the footage rolled.

There it was.

The hound.

Its massive silhouette prowled through the darkness, each movement captured in ghostly green. Even through the grainy lens, its presence radiated power. The way it turned its head, the slow deliberation of its sniffing—all of it mirrored exactly what we had witnessed. Then came the moment of disappearance. The pale light erupted from the earth, flooding the frame, and for an instant the screen went completely white.

But as the glare began to fade, something else appeared—something none of us had seen with our naked eyes.

A black figure.

Tall. Human-shaped. But not human.

It walked the same path the hound had taken, step for step, as though following an invisible scent trail. Its movements were eerily fluid, unnatural. And its eyes—red, piercing, aflame with intelligence and hunger—glowed from within the void of its face. It bent down, sniffed the earth just as the beast had done, and then paused.

For a heartbeat, it turned toward the camera.

The red eyes seemed to meet ours through the screen. Even through the lens, I felt it—*a consciousness looking back.*

And then, the same white light erupted once more, swallowing the shadow whole.

We recoiled as one. The room seemed to shrink around us, the air suddenly colder. The faint hum of the equipment grew louder, more oppressive. The silence that followed the playback was suffocating.

But the true horror came next.

Just before the creature vanished, a sound emerged from the recording—a low, guttural tone, rough as stone scraping against bone. It wasn't a growl or a bark. It was something trying to form words through a throat that was not made for speech.

"Iew."

The syllable hung in the air, distorted, echoing through the speakers like a ghost trapped in static. Once, then twice—the same word repeated just before the light consumed the figure.

And then nothing.

We sat frozen, the faint hiss of the recorder filling the void. None of us spoke, yet we could all feel the same thought clawing at our minds: *It spoke.*

Hours later, after a silence too heavy to bear, we began our frantic search. Every source we could access, every ancient archive we could find—we scoured it all, desperate for meaning. When the truth appeared on the screen, my stomach turned to ice.

The word was ancient Egyptian.

It meant: *To Come.*

The room fell utterly still.

The implications clawed their way into our thoughts, slow and merciless. The hound had not come to attack, not to threaten. It had come to *search.* It had traced invisible paths across the ground, performing some ancient duty. And when its work was done, it had spoken that single word—a summons.

To Come.

The realization settled over us like frost. Whatever the creature had been looking for, it had found. Whatever it had called for, it was on its way.

The sea moaned outside the window, wind rattling the panes. Somewhere beyond the horizon, the tide began to shift, whispering through the night like a secret carried by the deep.

And in that hollow silence, one thought pulsed through all of us:

If the hound was merely the messenger... what would happen when the one it had summoned finally came?

The Feast Before the Hunt

As the clock struck midnight, we sank into our beds, our bodies heavy and our minds haunted by the horrors that refused to fade. Sleep did not come easily—it crept upon us like a reluctant visitor, hesitating at the edge of our consciousness. Even in slumber, our dreams were restless, fractured visions of glowing eyes and the echo of a howl that had torn through the night like a curse.

When our eyes finally opened, sunlight had already filled the room. The curtains glowed with a soft golden hue, and the air carried the faint scent of the sea. For a moment, there was peace—a fragile illusion that maybe, somehow, the night before had been nothing more than a nightmare. But the moment our gazes met across the room, that illusion shattered. The silence between us spoke volumes. We didn't need words to remember what had happened, or to understand that the fear had followed us into the daylight.

The clock on the wall pointed to one o'clock in the afternoon. Hunger twisted in our stomachs, not just from the lack of food, but from something deeper—a hollow ache for normalcy, for something familiar that might cleanse the remnants of terror from our minds.

We summoned the cook and demanded a royal feast, as if grandeur could drive away the ghosts lingering in our thoughts. "Make it rich," Peter said, his voice hoarse but steady. "Something that makes us forget."

He promised us two hours, and those two hours felt endless. We sat in the lounge, the sound of the sea faint in the distance, each of us lost in the labyrinth of our own thoughts. The light outside was too bright, too still, and even the rhythm of the clock seemed oppressive. Every tick was a reminder that time was moving forward, dragging us inexorably toward the night—the hour of reckoning.

When the first aroma drifted in from the kitchen, it came like a gentle hand pulling us back from the edge of dread. The scent of simmering paya filled the air, rich and spicy, followed by the heavier fragrance of haleem—earthy, thick, comforting. Then came the biryani, its saffron-laced steam curling like golden threads through the room. The fragrances mingled and layered, wrapping us in warmth that almost felt human.

When the cook finally appeared with the platters, the sight of the food alone brought a hush over us. The table gleamed with polished silver dishes; the colors of the feast were a painting of comfort—crimson gravies, golden rice, tender meat glistening under the soft light.

We ate like men starved not just for food, but for life itself. Every bite was a small rebellion against the fear that clung to us. The spices struck our tongues like sparks, awakening something fierce within. Warmth spread through our bodies, melting the stiffness from our limbs. The biryani, layered with saffron and cardamom, carried us into another world—a world untouched by horror.

For a fleeting moment, laughter broke out. Light, shaky, uncertain—but real. Peter cracked a joke about the cook's heavy hand with the salt, and Diljeet rolled his eyes, pretending offense. Even I found myself smiling. It was strange, almost sinful, to laugh after what we had seen—but that laughter was a balm.

Yet once the last bite was swallowed and the last cup of cold lassi drained, silence crept back in like a slow fog. The clatter of cutlery faded, and in its place came the echo of memory—the sound of that voice.

That *voice.*

It wasn't just sound—it was command. Authority. Power. The booming, resonant voice that had summoned the hound back into the abyss was not of this world. It was neither human nor spirit, but something caught between—something that bent the air around it with sheer will.

We could still hear it in our minds, like a sound imprinted on the soul. The more we remembered it, the more certain we became that it did not belong to a man. No ordinary being could command a creature like that. The tone had been sharp, commanding, but laced with a darkness that vibrated through bone and blood alike.

"He's not human," I said quietly, my voice breaking the stillness. "Whoever... whatever that was—it controls them."

No one disagreed.

The decision came easily, as though fate had already made it for us. At exactly ten o'clock that night, we would return to the site. The beach that had witnessed the impossible would once again bear witness—to either our victory or our destruction.

The police, bound by orders from above, could not intervene.

They were watchers now, not warriors. Their fear had turned to duty, and they followed their roles with hollow precision. The local residents, driven by equal parts fear and faith, had offered the rooftops of their homes to the officers. From there, they would watch the night unfold in silence.

The stage was set.

When the sun dipped below the horizon, the city began to transform. Karachi at night was a paradox—a city of light and shadow, laughter and silence. The call to prayer echoed from the mosques, mingling with the sound of the waves. Somewhere in the distance, a rickshaw rattled past, its sound fading into the dark. The streets emptied as if the city itself sensed what was coming.

Inside the hotel, the staff moved quietly, their faces drawn and pale. They served our evening tea with trembling hands. The porcelain cups clinked against their saucers—a delicate sound that seemed far too loud in the heavy stillness. The tea was golden and fragrant, its aroma soothing but bittersweet.

Every sip tasted like farewell.

We drank in silence, the five of us, our eyes fixed on nothing and everything at once. The warmth of the tea did little to ease the cold that had settled in our chests. Each of us, in our own way, was saying goodbye—to safety, to certainty, perhaps even to life itself.

Three hours slipped through our fingers like water. The clock's ticking became the heartbeat of the room, steady and relentless.

Dinner was served at nine. The cook, perhaps out of fear or faith, had outdone himself. The table was laden with skewers of smoky kebabs, bowls of creamy chicken korma, naan soft as clouds, and fragrant rice that shimmered in the light. The richness of it all should have felt like a blessing, but instead, it felt like a ritual—a final meal before walking into darkness.

We ate quietly, each of us lost in our own thoughts. The food tasted of ashes, no matter how flavorful it was. Every bite carried the same question: would this be our last supper?

When the plates were cleared and the clock struck ten, a hush descended over the room. The air felt charged, heavy with expectation.

We rose from the table one by one, the weight of what lay ahead pressing down on our shoulders. Gone were the laughter and warmth of the afternoon. Gone were the comforts of normal life. What remained were resolve and fear, braided together like

inseparable threads.

This time, there would be no cameras. No EVP recorders or thermal scanners. We were not investigators tonight—we were soldiers walking into the unknown. Our gadgets, the very tools that had once given us courage, now felt useless against whatever waited out there.

Instead, we armed ourselves with weapons—cold, real, and tangible. Steel where once there had been faith. The clink of metal echoed through the room as rifles were loaded, knives strapped, and flashlights checked. Each motion was mechanical, precise, born of a shared determination that left no room for hesitation.

We stepped out of the hotel together, the night embracing us like a living thing. The air was cool, the sea's breath heavy with salt. Above, the moon hung low and swollen, casting a pale glow over the deserted streets. In the distance, the faint hum of the city lingered—a reminder that life continued elsewhere, unaware of the battle being prepared on its outskirts.

The police silhouettes stood watch from the rooftops, silent sentinels outlined against the night sky. Not one of them spoke. They simply watched as we passed, their eyes reflecting both respect and pity.

Every step toward the beach was a step away from safety. The closer we came, the louder the ocean grew, its rhythm now a drumbeat for the coming confrontation. The sand beneath our boots was cool, damp, almost alive with anticipation.

We stopped at the edge of the dunes, our weapons in hand. The moonlight spread across the expanse of the beach, silvering the waves and outlining the dark stretch where the hound had once appeared.

The wind carried the faint scent of salt and decay. The silence was unbearable, and yet none of us spoke. There was nothing left to say.

In that moment, I felt something stir deep within me—not courage, not defiance, but clarity. This was not a hunt. This was an ending, one that had been coming since the first night we had seen the hound.

We had chased ghosts before, crossed paths with spirits, and survived the unexplainable—but this was different. This was the threshold between the known and the forbidden.

And we had chosen to cross it.

As the waves crashed in the distance and the wind whispered across the sand, we took our first step forward—five men walking willingly into the jaws of darkness.

The Guardian of the Hellhound

Within no time, we reached the seaside. The night stretched endlessly before us, with the moon casting a silver veil upon the restless waters. The waves roared and hissed as if whispering secrets of ancient tragedies buried beneath. A salty wind whipped against our faces, carrying with it both the freshness of the ocean and an uncanny heaviness that tightened our chests. Each gust felt alive, as though unseen hands brushed past us, warning us to turn back before it was too late.

We signaled a thumbs-up to the policemen stationed on duty. Their rifles gleamed faintly under the moonlight, but their eyes betrayed unease. I leaned closer and cautioned them in a hushed tone not to open fire unless it was absolutely necessary. The men nodded stiffly, their faces pale with anticipation. The silence that followed was unbearable; even the sea seemed to pause, holding its breath with us.

It was exactly 10:00 p.m. when it began.

For nearly half an hour, nothing stirred—no footsteps, no sound beyond the crash of the waves. The air was still, the sand cold beneath our boots. Each second dragged longer than the last, stretching into a dreadful eternity. Then suddenly, the air grew heavier, pressing against our chests like an invisible weight. A chill rippled through the air as the world seemed to dim, the moon's glow weakening.

And then we saw it.

A colossal shadow unfolded across the sands, larger than any human frame could ever be. The shape moved with deliberate purpose, its every step sending tremors through the earth. From the darkness emerged a figure—immense, monstrous, and utterly alien.

All five of us surged forward instinctively, surrounding him in a half circle. Our weapons were raised, our fingers trembling on the triggers. The stranger stepped into the pale moonlight, and the sight of him froze us where we stood.

He was a giant of a man, towering as though sculpted from the bones of mountains. His shoulders stretched broad like temple gates, and his skin bore the color of scorched earth—ashen and cracked, as though fire had once licked every inch of it. His eyes glowed crimson, not with life but with something ancient and

infernal. When he smiled, the glint of his teeth shimmered like sharpened blades, and for a moment, we felt as though Death himself had taken human form.

Our hands tightened on our weapons, but before we could speak, the man let out a thunderous laugh. The sound rolled across the shoreline, echoing through the cliffs like the mocking laughter of a god. “Those,” he boomed, his voice deeper than the roar of the waves, “are nothing more than toys before me. They cannot harm me.”

What unnerved us most was not his size or his laugh—but his words. He spoke in our native tongue, perfectly, with no accent. Peter’s eyes widened. “He can... talk like us?” he whispered hoarsely, barely audible above the crashing surf.

Summoning what little courage remained, I stepped forward. “Can you speak in other languages?”

The giant smirked, his voice rolling like thunder. “I can speak in every tongue of this world.”

The words sent a shiver down my spine. There was no boast in his tone—only truth, spoken with the weight of eternity.

Our fear deepened, but curiosity burned brighter. I steadied my voice, though my heart pounded like a drum. “Was it you—and your hound—who have been spreading terror among the people of this society?”

The man’s crimson eyes darkened. Slowly, he shook his head. “No. My hound and I have not come to spread terror. We are guardians. We watch over those who escaped the flames of Hell. Their leader...” He paused, his voice dropping into a growl. “...is Pharaoh.”

The name struck us like a thunderbolt. My throat tightened. Both Peter and I spoke together, unable to contain ourselves. “You mean—the Pharaoh of Exodus?”

His gaze fixed upon us, unblinking, fierce. “Yes. That Pharaoh. His spirit has not perished. He walks this earth once more, seeking to gather the wicked, building an army of shadows to rule over the living.”

The sea groaned against the rocks as if mourning the truth revealed. A silence fell among us, broken only by the restless tide and the pounding of our hearts. The policemen behind us stood frozen, their rifles trembling in their hands, their faith in logic unraveling before the impossible.

“My mission,” the man continued, “is to capture those who fled the abyss. They belong to the fire, yet they wander here, tempting, corrupting, spreading Pharaoh’s will. But Pharaoh grows stronger with each passing night. He intends to extend his dominion across this country—and soon, across the world.”

A heavy gust of wind swept past us, scattering sand into the air. The moonlight seemed to flicker, as if the heavens themselves recoiled at his words.

I forced myself to swallow against the dryness in my throat. “Do you... need us in this battle?”

He shook his head grimly. “No mortal can withstand Pharaoh himself. I command ten warriors of the underworld to face him. But you—you and your policemen—can strike at his followers, the criminals of your society who now serve as Pharaoh’s eyes and ears.”

His voice carried the gravity of a commandment, not a request. It felt less like we were being asked and more like we were being chosen—drafted into a war older than our understanding.

Amit, ever the boldest among us, stepped forward. “Is there any way to arrest Pharaoh and his people?”

The stranger’s crimson eyes flickered with something older than time. “Yes. Strike Pharaoh with the Hunter’s Lash, a weapon forged in Hell. The blow will weaken him. Then, bind his hands with the Holy Knot. Only then can he be imprisoned.”

For a moment, no one spoke. The words “Hunter’s Lash” and “Holy Knot” echoed through my mind like forgotten prophecies. They sounded like relics of myth, yet the man’s tone left no room for disbelief.

A faint growl rumbled in the distance, low and menacing. The sands beneath our feet seemed to vibrate with it. We turned toward the darkness beyond the rocks, and though we could not see it, we felt the hound’s presence. Its breath was a scorching whisper that brushed against our skin, its unseen eyes burning holes into the night.

At last, the man revealed his name. “I am Abayomi, Guardian of the Abyss. And my hound...” He paused, his lips curling faintly. “...is called Fluffy.”

The name, so absurdly ordinary, struck us like an eerie joke—one that none of us dared to laugh at. The sound of it lingered oddly in the air, echoing faintly across the waves. Yet even through

that strange name, the weight of the beast's power was unmistakable. The air seemed to ripple with its restrained ferocity.

Abayomi's expression darkened. "I fear Pharaoh's followers may one day try to imprison me. But until then, I stand my ground."

The wind howled through the cliffs as if responding to his words. For a fleeting moment, the clouds parted, and the moon bathed him in silver light. It was then I realized the truth—he was not merely standing *on* the sand. The ground beneath his feet shimmered faintly, as though reality itself bent to his presence.

One by one, we extended our hands. Abayomi clasped each with the strength of a giant, sealing a pact in silence. "We will help you," I said, though my voice trembled against the enormity of the promise. The moment his hand met mine, a surge of heat ran up my arm—a power not painful, but ancient, raw, and unearthly.

Diljeet turned sharply to the policemen. "Did you hear every word of this?"

The officers nodded, their faces pale, their hands clutching their rifles tighter. They looked less like men of law and more like pilgrims witnessing a god.

I turned back to Abayomi. "We will meet again, tomorrow—at this very hour."

The giant's crimson eyes flickered with approval. Without another word, he stepped backward into the shadows. The darkness seemed to swallow him whole, devouring his immense frame until only the faint echo of the hellhound's growl lingered on the air. The growl faded gradually, replaced by the murmuring waves, as if the sea itself was exhaling in relief.

We stood rooted in silence for a long moment, hearts racing, until the night finally reclaimed its stillness. The policemen lowered their rifles. Amit rubbed his temples as if trying to convince himself that what he had witnessed wasn't madness. Peter stared at the spot where Abayomi had vanished, his lips moving soundlessly in prayer.

When we finally turned back toward the city lights, our footsteps felt heavier, as though each step pulled us deeper into an invisible war. The roads back to the hotel were empty, deserted, eerily calm. The lamps flickered as we passed beneath them, and for a moment, I could have sworn that the shadows around us moved just a second too late—like echoes caught between two worlds.

That night, unlike the ones before, we did not sleep in fear. We

slept in solemn anticipation. The whispers of the sea still echoed in our ears, and the crimson glow of Abayomi's eyes haunted the corners of our dreams.

For we knew then that our journey had changed forever. We were no longer explorers of the unknown. We were soldiers—drawn into a war older than time, between the light of man and the shadows of the damned.

And as the waves crashed ceaselessly upon the shore, I could almost hear it again—faint, distant, echoing through the night.

The low, guttural growl of *Fluffy*, prowling somewhere beyond sight... guarding the boundaries between our world and Hell itself.

The Pharaoh's Shadow: Secret of the Silence

The next morning began with a cleansing ritual of sorts. Each of us, still shaken from the events of the previous night, found solace under the rush of cold water as we bathed. The water struck our skin like needles, washing away not only the dust and sweat of fear but the lingering scent of salt and smoke from the haunted shore. The air carried a strange stillness, as though the dawn itself was holding its breath for what awaited us. Even the birds outside the hotel windows sang softer that morning, their songs hesitant, cautious—as if aware that something sacred and dreadful had taken root in the world.

When we gathered at the breakfast table, the scene was one of cautious celebration. The long dining hall of the hotel was bathed in warm sunlight that spilled through the high arched windows, glinting off the polished cutlery and white china plates. The aroma of freshly baked bread mingled with that of sizzling sausages and fried eggs, while buttered parathas steamed invitingly in silver platters. Cups of tea and coffee exhaled tiny clouds of fragrance into the cool air.

Abdul, ever the glutton, reached greedily for the honey jar while Diljeet protested that he hadn't even spread his butter yet. Peter joined in, laughing as he tore his paratha into pieces, dipping it into the spicy omelet. Their voices filled the hall, echoing lightly against the walls, and for a fleeting moment, the laughter sounded genuine —like the kind shared by brothers who had forgotten fear.

Even amid that fragile cheer, a quiet understanding pulsed beneath the surface. The sweetness of fruit salad, the sharpness of orange juice, and the gentle warmth of tea settled our nerves, but it could not soften the hard truth lingering at the edge of our minds: we were preparing for war. Every sip of tea was a pause before the storm, every bite a silent prayer for strength.

After finishing our meal, I motioned to Abdul. "Bring the map," I said.

He wiped his hands, then carefully unfolded the parchment on the table. Its creases carried the fatigue of long nights and desperate hope. The ink had begun to fade, yet the marks and circles upon it

burned brighter than any words could—each one a promise, a step toward unraveling Pharaoh's reign.

We leaned in, tracing routes with our fingers. The air around us thickened with determination. Policemen, our society, and even Abayomi himself were finally aligned. For once, the threads of human will and otherworldly power ran in harmony. It felt like destiny had chosen to pause in our favor.

We warned everyone not to waste time with distractions—no unnecessary purchases, no idle gossip, no detours. Each hour was precious now. The tension between urgency and faith carried us out the hotel doors and into the blinding light of morning.

The sea awaited us, vast and glimmering. Its surface shone like liquid glass, the waves rolling forward in slow, rhythmic sighs. The air was thick with salt, the horizon distant and mysterious. Standing there, we felt the enormity of it all—how small we were against the scale of the world, and yet how bound we had become to its secret battles.

It was here, amidst that haunting calm, that we found the very spot where the Hellhound had once emerged. The memory of that night clung to the sands; I could almost hear again the echo of its howl carried by the wind.

When we called Abayomi's name, the air shifted. The breeze stilled, the waves momentarily lost their rhythm—and then, as if drawn by an unseen command, he appeared. Abayomi emerged from the veil of sunlight and shadow, his presence larger than life, his every step commanding the very earth to obey. His crimson eyes gleamed softly, their usual fierceness dimmed by weariness. He spoke to the ground in a tongue older than any language we knew, his voice deep and resonant, carrying the cadence of a priest performing sacred rites.

Then, all of a sudden, not five but ten monstrous figures arose from the shadows around him. They towered like pillars of living stone—men of colossal height and power, their eyes burning with disciplined rage. The sand quaked beneath their weight, and the policemen instinctively raised their rifles.

Abayomi raised his palm, and the soldiers of the underworld froze mid-motion, their obedience immediate and absolute. His authority was beyond question. He turned to us, his tone steady but grave, and revealed our shared mission. The ten warriors listened intently, their expressions unreadable, and when Abayomi's final

command resounded, they nodded solemnly. It was the acknowledgment of an oath.

Yet even as this alliance formed, I saw something in Abayomi's face—a shadow deeper than exhaustion. His voice wavered for the first time. "The Hellhound was stolen," he said slowly, the words heavy as tombstones. "Taken by the Pharaoh and his men."

The silence that followed was unbearable. The sea itself seemed to hush, as though grieving. I saw Diljeet's knuckles whiten as he clenched his rifle. Amit turned away, muttering a curse under his breath. The policemen exchanged uneasy glances, their faith trembling under the weight of what this meant.

Abayomi's jaw tightened. "They will use him," he said, "as bait —or as weapon. We must recover him before Pharaoh binds his power."

Those words reignited our resolve. Diljeet immediately began whispering instructions to the officers, forming small groups and assigning lookouts. Abdul fetched his satchel of equipment, his trembling hands betraying the storm inside him. We were bound by one thought now: follow the trail, find the Pharaoh, reclaim the hound.

Our journey began beneath the burning sun. The hours dragged endlessly, the heat pressing down upon us like judgment itself. We passed through rocky paths where the ground cracked beneath our boots, across grassy plains where the wind carried the scent of dust and decay, and through the skeletons of forgotten ruins that whispered of civilizations swallowed by time. Each step was a prayer against fear.

Then, without warning, Abayomi and his companions slowed. Their eyes glowed faintly, their forms shifting. The illusion of humanity melted from them, and their true selves—giant, otherworldly, terrible—emerged once more. The ground trembled faintly beneath their weight.

"The hound is near," Abayomi said. His gaze turned toward the distant hills. "It has changed its shape into... a kitten."

For a moment, disbelief flickered across our faces. A kitten? The absurdity almost drew laughter—but no one dared. We listened instead. Then came the faintest sound—a soft, plaintive meow carried by the wind.

We followed that fragile sound like pilgrims chasing a divine whisper. It led us down narrow alleys and into a bazaar bursting

with life. The air was alive with the scent of spices—cumin, turmeric, roasted chilies—and the voices of merchants bargaining over piles of fabric, jewels, and food.

Then, amid the noise, came the thunder of hooves.

A man on horseback rode through the chaos, his face entirely concealed by cloth, his movements sharp and commanding. Behind him marched an army of criminals—rough men, scarred and cold-eyed. Their numbers swelled, nearly twenty of them, their presence spreading unease through the crowd. Coins passed between hands, jewels vanished into pockets, and silence followed wherever they went. The people of the bazaar knew better than to speak when evil paraded so openly.

But then something miraculous occurred.

From the shadows of a nearby stall, a small kitten leapt from its cage. Its fur glowed faintly in the sunlight, and its eyes—those unmistakable, glowing eyes—locked with Abayomi's. The world seemed to pause. Even the merchants fell silent as the tiny creature dashed forward, weaving through legs and baskets until it reached Abayomi. With unearthly speed, it climbed into his waiting arms and pressed its head against his chest.

For the first time since we had known him, Abayomi smiled. It was faint, almost sorrowful, yet filled with a warmth that silenced us all.

We moved quickly after that, slipping through the alleys until we reached a small refreshment stall on the bazaar's edge. There, under the shade of a tattered canopy, we finally allowed ourselves to breathe.

Chilled mango juice was poured into steel glasses, its sweetness cutting through the heat. Plates of thick, juicy burgers arrived, the scent of grilled meat mingling with fresh coriander and onions. We ate hungrily, laughter bubbling up in short bursts that felt both strange and healing. For a moment, it almost felt normal—five men sharing a meal in the sun.

But even that peace was fragile. Amit broke it with a quiet question. "How will we ever find their homes?" His tone carried doubt, his eyes searching Abayomi's face for an answer.

Abayomi stroked the kitten gently, its tiny purrs vibrating against his hand. "Every place is in the mind of this little one," he said softly. "He will guide us. He remembers the scent of evil. He will lead us into Pharaoh's shadows—for the sake of humanity."

Those words hung in the air long after they were spoken. The bazaar's chaos resumed around us, but within our circle, time seemed to still.

By the time we returned to our home, the day was nearing its end. The sun was a burning disc sinking into the sea, staining the sky with crimson streaks. Inside, steaming cups of chai awaited us. The aroma of cardamom and milk filled the room, wrapping us in comfort that felt almost holy.

We drank in silence, letting the warmth seep into our weary bones. The walls seemed to hum faintly with the echoes of unseen forces moving in preparation for what was to come.

A few hours later, lunch was served—spicy curry, fragrant rice, sizzling kebabs. The plates emptied faster than they were filled. Laughter returned in soft waves, mingled with exhaustion, relief, and fragile hope.

And when the plates were cleared, silence returned once more. The world outside had gone quiet, the light dimming into evening.

Within an hour, sleep conquered us. One by one, we drifted into dreams both haunting and prophetic. Somewhere in the distance, the waves whispered against the shore, as though rehearsing the symphony of war that would come with the next dawn.

That night, the air around us trembled not with fear, but with anticipation—the stillness that comes before the world changes forever.

The Battle with Pharaoh's Army

The following morning dawned grey and silent, as if the world itself was hesitant to rise after the chaos that had befallen it. The sea beyond our window was calm again, but its calmness felt deceptive—like the pause before a storm decides whether to return.

We gathered around a large sheet of paper spread across the table. The edges of the map curled upward from the humidity, and our fingers pressed them down as we began to sketch our final plan. Sunlight filtered through the curtains in narrow beams, falling on faces that had aged overnight. Our eyes were hollow but determined; the sleepless night had carved resolve where fear once lived.

Abdul's hand trembled slightly as he drew a red line connecting the five camps marked near the seaside. "If we strike here first," he said, his voice low but steady, "we can destroy their supplies before they even mobilize."

Peter nodded, adjusting his glasses. "We'll need to synchronize every move down to the minute."

I looked around at my companions—men who had once been mere adventurers, now soldiers standing on the edge of legend. "Remember," I said, my tone hard as steel, "our enemy isn't just flesh and blood. Pharaoh's followers are creatures of the abyss. They thrive on fear. Don't give them any."

We exchanged silent glances of understanding. There was no turning back now.

When we reached the meeting point by the seaside, the landscape was unrecognizable. The night before, the same place had been cloaked in gloom and mystery. Now, under the morning sun, the air shimmered with heat. Seagulls cried overhead, circling the restless waves, and the horizon burned white with sunlight. Yet, beneath that brightness, the same unease coiled in our stomachs.

We called out Abayomi's name. The syllables echoed across the sand and into the wind. A moment later, the air shimmered—and from that shimmer, he appeared, towering and solemn, flanked by his ten colossal servants. They stood in a line, silent as statues, their presence bending the light around them.

Their armor gleamed faintly, forged from something darker than steel, and their expressions carried the weight of centuries. Even the

policemen, hardened by years of service, shifted uneasily at the sight.

Abayomi's deep, resonant voice broke the silence. "You have called, and I have come. What do you command, mortals?"

I gestured toward the horizon. "We plan to strike the Pharaoh's camps before nightfall. We've mapped their supply points. If we destroy them, his army will weaken."

Abayomi's crimson eyes glowed faintly. "A wise plan. But remember—my soldiers and the hounds of Hell cannot remain here longer than two hours. When the veil lifts, they must return to their realm."

"Two hours," I repeated. "Then we fight with precision, not with haste."

At my signal, the policemen stepped forward. Their uniforms looked almost ceremonial under the sunlight, but their eyes burned with raw fear. I saw a reflection of myself in them—mortals standing against the impossible.

I pointed at the map again. "There are five camps, each one a kilometer apart. They're built close to the seaside. We've been there—we've seen the layout. We strike from above, using fire."

Abayomi nodded solemnly, then lifted his hand. "Summon the hounds."

The ground trembled. From the shadowed corners of the dunes, twenty monstrous forms emerged—hellhounds, each with eyes that glowed like molten embers and fur that shimmered like black fire. They bowed their heads to Abayomi, awaiting his command.

"Transform," I ordered. "Become haron birds so no one suspects."

Instantly, the air twisted. The hounds' bodies contorted, shrinking, sprouting feathers and wings until they stood as immense dark birds, their wings slicing through the sunlight. The policemen stepped back, whispering prayers under their breath.

Dilgeet stepped forward, holding a sack of gunpowder. "Take this," he said, his voice trembling yet firm. "Carry it in your beaks and lay it from here to the huts. Make the line straight—unbroken."

The haron birds obeyed, soaring high above the dunes, their wings beating like drums of war. From our vantage, they looked like moving shadows, drawing an invisible line of destruction across the shore.

When the last of the gunpowder was set, I crouched low and

touched a flame to it. The spark hissed to life. For an instant, nothing happened—then the fire raced forward, alive and furious.

It slithered across the sand, a serpent of light and heat, until it reached the first hut.

The explosion shattered the silence.

Flames leapt high, roaring skyward. One hut ignited after another, the chain reaction unstoppable. The horizon turned into a wall of inferno stretching a full kilometer. Smoke blackened the sky, and the sea reflected the fire's fury, turning crimson beneath the daylight.

"We did it," Peter whispered, awe in his voice.

But celebration never came. The air itself shifted. The ground trembled beneath our feet. Out of the rolling smoke emerged a shadow larger than life—Pharaoh himself.

He was draped in black and gold, his form colossal, his crown glinting with unholy fire. His eyes burned like twin suns, and his expression was carved with hatred so pure it chilled the blood.

Behind him marched his army—scores of monstrous men armed with blades that shimmered like mercury. Their armor clanked in rhythm, a sound that drowned out even the roaring flames.

"Stand your ground!" I shouted.

Abayomi stepped forward, drawing his sword, its blade etched with infernal runes. "You dare rise against me, Pharaoh?" he thundered.

Pharaoh's laugh rolled like thunder over the sea. "You betrayed your own kind, Abayomi. The abyss will claim you yet."

"Not today," Abayomi growled.

And then the battle began.

The haron birds shrieked as they dove, twisting midair back into their monstrous forms—great ravens of fire and shadow. They tore into Pharaoh's soldiers, claws ripping through armor, beaks striking like daggers. The air filled with the sound of chaos—screams, metal, and wings.

We joined the fight, each of us clutching our amulet necklaces, their faint glow pulsing in rhythm with our heartbeats. Every soldier we touched froze mid-strike, their bodies hardening like stone. The amulets drained their energy, leaving them powerless.

"Now!" I shouted.

Abayomi's servants surged forward, seizing the immobilized soldiers and dragging them toward a swirling rift that had opened

in the sand—a gaping mouth to the underworld. The air howled as they vanished into it.

Pharaoh roared, his blade cleaving through air, scattering sparks. “You think you can banish me?” he thundered. “I am eternal!”

“Not without the lash,” Abayomi reminded, his voice echoing with grim certainty.

I gritted my teeth and pulled the Hunter’s Lash from my belt—a weapon we had recovered days ago under Abayomi’s guidance. Its handle burned cold against my palm, its whip shimmering with dark light.

With all my strength, I struck.

The lash cracked through the air and struck Pharaoh across the chest. His body shuddered; the flames in his eyes dimmed for the first time. Abayomi roared, “Now bind him!”

Peter threw the Holy Knot forward, the cord of sacred light wrapping around Pharaoh’s wrists. The more he struggled, the tighter it drew, glowing brighter until the shadows around him began to collapse.

Pharaoh’s scream split the air, a sound that rattled the bones of the earth. Then his form began to fade, pulled backward by unseen hands. “This is not the end!” he howled. “I will return!”

Abayomi’s ten servants dragged his limp form toward the rift. The moment they crossed its threshold, the chasm sealed with a flash of light. Silence followed—a silence so deep it felt holy.

The war was over.

We stood there for what felt like hours, staring at the scorched land, our lungs filled with smoke and disbelief. The wind carried the scent of burnt sand and salt. Slowly, the horizon began to clear.

Abayomi turned to us. “It is done,” he said softly. “You have fought with courage. The living world owes you its peace.”

He looked toward the sea, his expression distant. “But remember this—evil never dies. It sleeps. When it wakes, mortals must again rise.”

We nodded, words failing us. Then, with one final bow, Abayomi and his servants dissolved into mist, fading into the fading light of dawn.

When we returned to the hotel, the scene was surreal. The entire Shams Society had gathered to greet us. People lined the streets, throwing flowers, chanting our names. Old men wept openly.

Children pressed garlands into our hands. The policemen stood tall among them, saluting with pride.

For the first time in days, laughter filled the air. The weight that had hung over Gharo was finally lifted. We were no longer strangers—we were saviors.

That evening, as the sun melted into the horizon, we sat by the veranda overlooking the calm sea. The sky blazed with hues of gold and crimson, mirroring the fire that had ended Pharaoh's reign. Cups of steaming chai rested in our hands. We said nothing for a long time—there was nothing left to say.

At last, Abdul broke the silence with a soft chuckle. "Do you think he'll come back?"

I looked toward the sea, where the last light of day trembled on the waves. "If he does," I said quietly, "we'll be ready."

And with that, peace settled upon us like a gentle veil. The waves rolled softly against the shore, carrying away the ashes of battle. For the first time since our arrival, sleep came easy—and dreamless.

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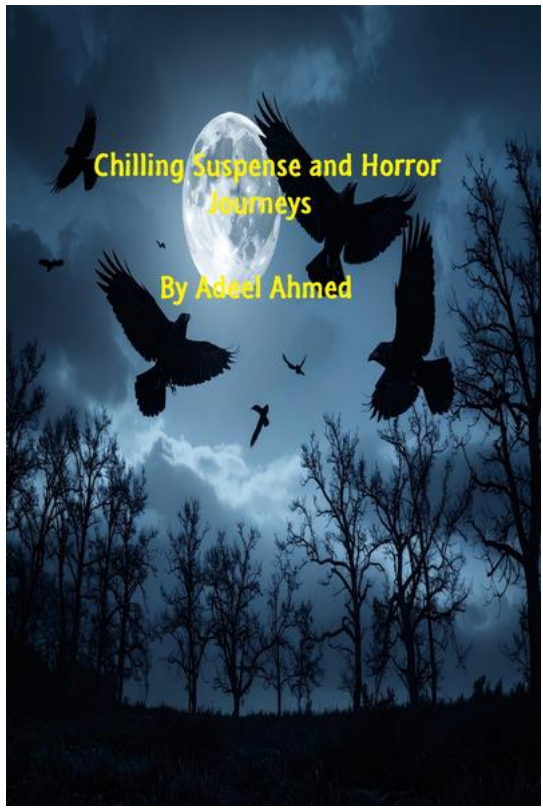

The story revolves around five close friends, each gifted with unique talents. Beyond their ordinary skills, they share a hidden ability—investigating the supernatural. Their mission is not merely to confront ghosts, demons, or djinns, but to free innocent people from the dark influence of these evil forces. Bound by loyalty and courage, they embark on perilous journeys, traveling from place to place in search of those who need their help. The first four chapters of the book focus on their past, exploring their individual lives, challenges, and the deep bond of friendship that unites them. From there, the narrative shifts into their chilling adventures, where

haunted encounters test both their bravery and their unbreakable connection.

About the Author

My journey as an author is marked by a unique ability to blend technical insight with compelling narrative. My writing often explores the intersection of technology and human experience, making complex concepts accessible to readers of all backgrounds. Whether crafting insightful technical guides, thought-provoking essays, or engaging fiction, I bring clarity, depth, and creativity to every page.

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